

U.S.-Mexico Cooperation in Education: A Texan Program Leads the Way

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RESUMEN

En los Estados Unidos, el sector educativo ha sido sumamente impactado por la inmigración de mexicanos a nivel escolar, representado en la tasa de deserción escolar más alta. Este artículo examina el programa LUCHA, un esfuerzo binacional, patrocinio de la Universidad de Texas en Austin y del gobierno mexicano a través del IME, para reducir la deserción escolar e incrementar la tasa de esta población que culmina su preparatoria en E.U. Emigración, inmigración, transnacionalización y deserción escolar son temas de este artículo. Factores que hicieron posible la creación, implementación e impacto del programa, ilustran el compromiso y tenacidad necesarios para hacer posible que un acuerdo de cooperación binacional en materia educativa tenga éxito.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Inmigración, educación, preparatoria, deserción escolar, cooperación binacional

ABSTRACT

In the United States, the education sector has been profoundly impacted by Mexican immigrant students of high school age who represent the highest dropout rate of foreign born Hispanic students. This article examines the LUCHA program, a binational effort, sponsored by the University of Texas at Austin and the Mexican government through IME, (Institute of Mexicans Abroad) to reduce the dropout rate and increase the United States graduation rate of this population. Emigration, immigration, transnationalization and dropping out of school are themes of this article. Factors which made possible the creation, implementation and impact of the program, illustrate the commitment and tenacity necessary to bring about a successful binational agreement of cooperation in the field of education.

KEY WORDS: Immigration, education, high school, dropout, binational cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on LUCHA, an innovative program that aims to lower the dropout rate of Hispanic and mainly Mexican high school students in the U.S. The LUCHA program was created in 2006 through the initiative of Felipe Alanis, a Mexican American dean at the University of Texas at Austin who sought support from the Mexican government to lower the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate of Mexican immigrant students in Texas high schools. His request was echoed by Mexican officials who had been searching for an effective way to provide the long-requested support for educational opportunities of Mexicans living abroad by the Mexican government. The positive results yielded by the LUCHA program were an incentive to the Mexican government to make a financial commitment to this end by providing IME grants to the program for three consecutive years.

The program's quality services and their positive outcomes are recognized by the Texas Education Agency, the state agency charged with carrying out the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act, which presents daunting challenges to the population of English Language Learners in the state.

The purpose of this article is to present the LUCHA program where binational cooperation in education is enacted, while providing its historical context and some of the many socio-cultural challenges inherent in the binational nature of this educational program.

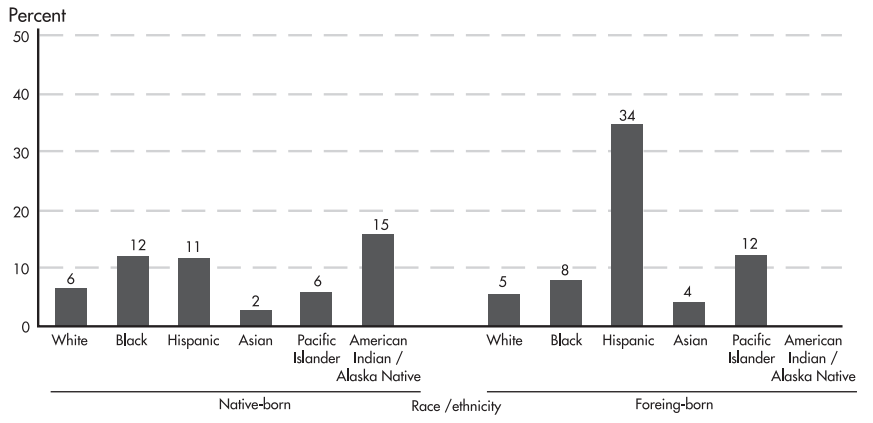
BACKGROUND

The dropout problem of Mexican immigrants in U.S. schools is important to both the U.S. and Mexico. The Mexican government acknowledges responsibility for all Mexicans abroad and their most urgent request – to provide support for educational initiatives in the United States.

In the U.S., Mexican heritage students comprise the largest group within the Hispanic population and their dropout rate is higher than the other major ethnic groups in the nation. The Hispanic dropout rate for the population between 16 and 24 is 45 percent, 11 percent of whom are native born and 34 percent who are foreign born (NCES, 2009b) (See Figure 1). This has drawn attention and resources from all sectors affected to try to ameliorate this situation. My research suggests that binational cooperation is part of the solution to this problem.

U.S. public schools have alarmingly low high school completion rates. Hispanics are particularly affected as they are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. school-age population and manifest low levels of college readiness, enrollment, and completion. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2007, U.S. public schools served over 53 million students; some 20.4 percent (or 10.8 million) spoke a language other than English at home and

Figure 1
U. S. 2007 status dropout rate by ethnicity of native born and foreign born individuals 16 through 24 years old



Fuente: (NCES, 2009b)

five percent (or 2.7 million) spoke English with difficulty. Seventy-five percent of those who spoke English with difficulty spoke Spanish (Planty, 2009). In Texas, Hispanics now constitute nearly half of all students in public schools and the growth of ELL students is phenomenal. In 2008, 92% of the ELL population (775,645 students) speaks Spanish (TEA, 2008). Unfortunately, few initiatives at the state or national level take advantage of Mexico’s geographic proximity to create cooperative partnerships to address the needs of a shared student community.

This means that the task of improving Hispanic academic achievement is left to each school district, some of which individually seek help from Mexican institutions and fill their high-attrition bilingual teacher positions with Mexican hires in an ad hoc manner. For example, the Houston Independent School District hires professionals in Mexico through a teacher certification program with the *Universidad Regiomontana* in Nuevo León, México. Mexican hires, offered one-to-three year contracts with the district, teach Spanish and bilingual students from K-12. The same approach is taken by other U.S. school districts in cooperation with other Mexican universities.

Our bordering nations share a student community that is increasingly transnational. To clarify, the term “transnational” in this article takes the meaning conveyed by Faist (2000) who explains that transnationalism usually refer to sustained ties of persons, networks and organizations across borders of two or more nation-states; ties range from little to highly institutionalized forms. Portes (2007) defines the term through transnational migration saying “this massive displacement is not one-way, but it plays back, with rising force, becoming an important factor in the development of sending nations and regions.”

Challenges of Binational Cooperation

Issues of power have always been present in relations among countries (Ayres, 2004; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). The U.S.-Mexico relationship is no exception, made only more evident with the trade problems that have resulted from Mexico imposing import quotas on products coming from the U.S. after a breach of international agreements under NAFTA with a truck ban to Mexican trucks in the U.S. (Griswold, 2001).

Migration from developing to developed countries is stirred by rising income gaps between border economies (Cortés, 2000; Eder, 2001; Zúñiga, 1998). The U.S.-Mexico border has a history of family relationships across borders. Members of extended Mexican families were settled on both sides of the new Mexico-U.S. border of 1848. There was relatively free movement of people across the border during the 19th and early 20th centuries; it was not until the border became regulated that family members were separated by a place that required government permits to cross. Besides the family relations that generally move towards reunification, economic pulls have determined the flow of migration in the U.S.-Mexico border in the span of seven generations (Romo, 2005). Currently, there is yet another important reason for Mexicans to migrate to the U.S. that is not historical. Security and life-threatening circumstances due to the rise in criminal activity in Mexico is pushing Mexicans to look for work alternatives in the U.S.

Fearing the loss of national identity and fueled by perceived threats of terrorism exacerbated by 'foreigners', policies like Arizona's SB 1070 (Archibold, 2010) new state law passed in April 2010 that entitles policemen to ask people about their immigration status if they find "reasonable suspicion" that they are in the country illegally, as well as the stall in a promised immigration reform in the U.S., are sparking mass marches, protests, debates, and comments. A few years ago, a similar reaction was spurred by the Sensenbrenner's Immigration Enforcement bill aimed to control illegal immigration (Sensebrenner, 2006) in January 2006 provoking intense responses on both sides of the border. Conservative policies such as the ones mentioned and political responses seem to work at cross purposes with the need of modern capitalism for global regional strength, which takes the form of treaties among countries like NAFTA (Pastor, 2001; Stiglitz, 2003; Waters, 2001).

Immigrants and the Mexican Government

The Mexican migration to the U.S. has a transnational pattern. Studies in the transnationalization of international migration highlight the reciprocity in small groups, exchange in a circulating pattern and solidarity in communities that have essentially re-located. The immigrant transnational experience of Mexicans is different from that of immigrants from other countries. Portes

et al. (2007) and authors like González Gutiérrez (1999) and Goldring (2002) provide an excellent review of these distinctions highlighting several key aspects: it is larger than all other Latin American groups combined; Mexican immigrants commonly contribute regularly to their hometown civic associations; there is a strong and proactive presence of the federal state in the transnational field; the programs and services of the *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores* (SRE) through their *Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior* (IME – Institute of Mexicans Abroad) do not compare to any of its kind (Portes et al., 2007).

The Mexican government acknowledges the large number of Mexican emigrants to the U.S. and the linked responsibility to create public policy that recognizes the existence of transnational communities, whose members simultaneously maintain loyalties and/or economic ties to both countries. In accordance with this, the Mexican government has created *plazas comunitarias* (community ‘spaces’) where adults receive library services as well as adult education to complete their elementary and secondary education in addition to English and job-skills training. Through Mexican consulates in the U.S. and Canada, Mexican immigrants receive limited legal and health services, binational trade guidance and support. The Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME), created in 2003, coordinates these activities in the U.S. and Canada through the Mexican Consulates. The IME has a *Consejo Consultivo* (Advisory Board) with 105 members residing in Mexico, the U.S. and Canada. The objective of the *Consejo Consultivo* is to promote the well-being of Mexicans abroad and to develop strong ties among the three countries to enable cooperation in areas that include education, health, trade, culture and sports (Fox Quesada & Derbez Bautista, 2003).

IMMIGRATION AND EDUCATION

Scholarly work has clearly shown that immigrant students draw upon cultural resources and ethnic identities not available to minority students born in the U.S. and that those resources help immunize them from the debilitating effects of racism and discrimination (Gibson, 1997; Ogbu, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). Stanton-Salazar (1997) points out that there is not yet available research to support that immigrant youth “make it” without significant institutional support. He mentions that “the development and maintenance of heightened levels of motivation, when not rooted in systematic and consistent access to institutional support, represents a form of heroism sustainable only by a most unrelenting misperception of structural reality” (p. 29). The abysmal academic performance and dropout statistics of Hispanic immigrant students compared to other ethnic groups in the U.S. (NCES, 2009b) are particularly heartbreaking because of these realities and the intellectual and cultural potential that is squandered.

Reports constantly document the high dropout rate of Hispanics in the U.S. and warn that the situation is getting worse (Barton, 2005; Fry, 2003). Fry mentions that high school dropout rates are a key performance measure for the United States education system. Nationally, thirty-five percent of Latino youth are immigrants, compared to less than five percent of non-Latino youth. Barton argues that this challenging social reality must be matched by greater efforts and success in getting students through to high school graduation, thereby opening doors for more educational opportunities and decent paying jobs. Furthermore, when students do drop out, there needs to be a larger system of second chance opportunities for them to return to school and remain there until they graduate.

Hispanic Low-Achievement in U.S. Schools

Basic education in Mexico and in the U.S. is not the same. In Mexico, basic education ends in *3o. de Secundaria* which is equivalent to U.S. 9th grade. In the U.S., basic education ends in 12th grade, which is *preparatoria* in Mexico. Thus, a low dropout rate (*una baja deserción escolar*) in basic education is an indicator of a successful educational system. In the U.S., research has been conducted to identify the causes of low Hispanic achievement. Some authors focus on studying students who do not have English language academic proficiency and are not taught in their native language (Gonzalez, Huerta-Macías, & Tinajero, 1998; Noguera, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, 1987). Other authors focus on influences that affect the teaching and learning process including parent involvement, cultural capital, funds of knowledge, racial discrimination, under-funded schools, teacher attrition, and disenfranchising attitudes toward school among others (Fuller, 2002; Gándara & Moreno, 2002; González et al., 1995; Rauh, Parker, Garfinkel, Perry, & Andrews, 2003; Sykes, 2003). Efforts have been made to improve immigrant and minority academic achievement. Bilingual programs in schools are evidence of such efforts (Gonzalez et al., 1998; González & Moll, 2002; Hamman, 1999).

The Hispanic (Mainly Mexican) Dropout Crisis

Schools struggle to meet the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy-based standards, an already difficult task complicated by the constant arrival of newcomers, most of whom do not speak English. Because of the “language barrier” that is created and perpetuated by inadequately-equipped schools, poor leadership and policies that are ill-suited to these youth (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010), new immigrant students frequently face circumstances that more than likely will impede their progress. Thus, they lose their opportunity to graduate from high school. Despite the large percentages of students dropping out and literally disappearing from school from one year to the

next, statistics fail to report the impact of this event for which school districts should be held accountable (Valenzuela, Fuller, & Vasquez-Heilig, 2006).

Exacerbated by the limited English proficiency of immigrant students, the system of high-stakes standardized testing leaves these students behind (Valenzuela, 2004). The focus on standards, assessment, and accountability ostensibly designed to raise teaching quality (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2006) and the subsequent teaching-to-the-test mentality frequently result in a marginalization of children, curricula, or both (Carnoy, Loeb, & Smith, 2001; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997). According to McNeil and Valenzuela (2000), these standardized tests damage the educational quality and opportunities for minority, economically disadvantaged youth, a situation exacerbated by poor schools serving students in poverty. The importance placed in these tests encourage administrators and teachers to use scarce resources on test preparation materials leaving students without time to learn skills and knowledge that can help them get out of poverty. This is a practice that tracks students to low social stratification once they are out of school (Foley, 1990; Portes & Rumbaut, 1997; Tienda & Mitchell, 2006).

Raising standardized test scores on high-stakes tests has had little impact on significant educational outcomes (Carnoy et al., 2001) such as high school completion and the likelihood of students attending college (McNeil, 2005). This is particularly troublesome because high school graduation rates are alarmingly low in Texas. Even when statistics show that only 1.6% of students in Texas drop out of school each year, the fact is that there were 274,208 8th graders in Texas in 1993 and only 197,186 graduates in 1998 while the population increased by 5.9% (Greene, 2002). Vasquez and Hammond (2008) also found that statistics and ways of counting students are manipulated to obscure the real dropout crises.

Hispanic students' elevated high school dropout rates relative to White and African American students are partly attributable to the markedly high dropout rates among Hispanic immigrants. It is important to note that more than one-half of Hispanic immigrants of appropriate school age never enrolled in a U.S. school, but are included as high school dropouts if they did not complete high school in their country of origin (Kaufman & Alt, 2004; Llagas, 2003), highlighting the binational nature of the dropout problem.

Binational Cooperation Projects on Education

Binational cooperation projects that expose teachers to basic educational practices and experiences of the country of origin of their immigrant students show a change in the way these teachers perceive and work with their students. U.S. teachers with teaching development workshops and teaching experiences in Mexico change their cultural perception of immigrant students in the U.S.

which brings about a positive change in their teaching practice.

Calderon (1995) reports on binational cooperation efforts to improve the teaching of Latino children on '*la frontera*' (the border). Her study focuses on the program of Leadership Enhancement Academy for Bilingual Education (LEA) in El Paso. Hamman and Zúñiga and Hernández (1999; Zúñiga & Hernández-León, 2005) report on the Dalton teachers' summer program in Monterrey that exposed Anglo teachers to the culture of their Latino students back home. It was found that the Georgia Project benefitted the community through positive intervention of Mexican scholars and teachers in seven school districts in Dalton, Georgia. The Georgia project led to institutional legitimacy for controversial positions and debates in bilingual education, increase of "cultural knowledge" to respond to immigration, presence of intermediaries for dialogue and mediation between immigrants and local actors, the creation of a Latino immigrant organization, and the first glimpses of external prestige garnered by an otherwise often invisible and disdained immigrant community.

TEXAS LEADS THE WAY WITH THE LUCHA PROGRAM

In Texas, the Language Learners at The University of Texas at Austin Center for Hispanic Achievement (LUCHA) Program started a binational partnership in education to lower the alarming dropout rate. The target population is the high school Hispanic foreign born immigrant student, identified by the National Center for Education Statistics Report on The Condition of Education report (NCES, 2009a) as the core of the dropout problem.

With the increase of Mexican immigration in the last decades, U.S. schools are challenged to provide education to newcomers arriving at different grade levels and speaking languages other than English. In addition to an ever growing list of responsibilities, counselors in U.S. high schools are charged with making recommendations for student placement, a situation made almost impossible to accomplish effectively because they are often at a loss when reading Mexican students' transcripts. In most schools, there is no one knowledgeable in the Mexican educational system to provide an accurate account of the newcomer immigrant student's academic history. Thus, high-school newcomers coming from Mexico are usually placed in the 9th grade in the hopes that the students will learn English before they are taught core courses content.

The consequences of this practice have not been successful. Students are often placed with peers much younger than themselves and are provided curricula loaded with elective courses rather than those with substantive academic content to which they were accustomed in their previous academic experience. Students' frustration drives them out of school.

In Texas, a visionary found a way to halt the high school dropout cycle

through a program that provided numerous services to these students. Dr. Felipe Alanis, former director of the K-16 Education Center at The University of Texas at Austin sought support from the Mexican government and specifically from the IME to develop the LUCHA program. The IME embraced the LUCHA program since it was first proposed to them. Although far from national in scope, LUCHA directly aimed to fulfill the long heard plea IME had received from the Mexicans communities living abroad who requested institutional support to create educational opportunities in the U.S.

The LUCHA program works with Mexico and with Mexicans, Mexican-Americans and educators of all nationalities in the U.S, all of whom join forces to work to improve the education and educational outcomes of a high school population for which, according to the Mexican government, both countries share responsibility. At a time when the media focuses on differences and difficulties on the border, the people involved in the program have created ways to collaborate, first through bilateral agreements of cooperation on education, and consequently with the painstaking work required to put the particulars of these agreements into practice.

From Commitment to Reality

LUCHA represented a commitment from actors in both countries, and initially this 'consent' did not go unchallenged.

In discussing the very beginnings of LUCHA, Alanis said, "This is where we started, how do we fill that gap? How do we as a university try to fill in that gap?" Furthermore, he recognized the potential that technology, which had been used both in Mexico and the United States for distance learning, seemed to be an asset to be investigated. Dr. Alanis posits:

How could we help in the schools using the technology that we have today? And so when we realized that Mexico has web-based high school courses we thought, would it be possible to make these courses serve as a bridge? A) an academic content bridge, and B) a cultural bridge because the student feels a sense of self-worth and self-esteem if he's studying something that he acknowledges, recognizes and validates his sense of being. And because we had the experience here dealing with these web-based courses in English we thought well let's marry the two. Let's use our expertise and our knowledge and get together with Mexico (Interview, July 2007).

In spite of Dr. Alanis' position and qualifications as well as his social and cultural capital, it was not always a smooth road from his idea to an agreement between the University of Texas and the Mexican government. He recalls:

Just to sign an agreement was very, very difficult. Because to get the university which has historically and traditionally been very cautious about dealing with other countries... And I think, some of it was based on the misconception that whatever comes from the south might be inferior, or of a lesser quality than, or not equal to, then you have that, I think, bias, built-in perception from both sides, from both sides... politically we have an immigrant issue, that ideology, some ideology does not favor, want or feel like it is encouraging more immigration rather than less. And so the difficult part is that once the program is established, they start criticizing it as to what are you doing? Are you pampering? Are you encouraging? Are you giving more? Are you giving them something that they don't deserve?... that is the tough part, the timing. If there were different times where relations were great and immigration wasn't coming in hoards and all of that, it probably would have been a better time, but that was the tough part (Interview, December 2008).

A great deal of patience and tenacity were required to work out all the details of the memorandum of understanding between The University of Texas and the Institute of Mexicans Abroad.

The LUCHA Program's Academic Services

Since its creation in 2006, the LUCHA program has offered several services to aid school districts in their responsibility to provide equal educational opportunities to all students in Texas. This assistance includes obtainment of students' transcripts from Mexico, transcript analysis, diagnostic exams in Spanish, and online content-rich courses in Spanish.

Each of these services aims to address and attempts to mitigate some of the systematic obstacles that students with limited English proficiency face which contribute to their decision to drop out of school. Among some of the reasons identified are: over-aged 9th graders, incorrect placement due to a lack of credit for equivalent work completed in Mexico, inaccurate academic diagnosis, failing because they are not able to comprehend content in English, and not able to graduate in four years.

The LUCHA program helps to build on the academic knowledge immigrant students already have, thus saving time and money for students and schools alike. Most importantly, the program capitalizes the students' human resource potential, since it builds on students' prior knowledge to advance education. Besides the 10,253 credits recommended to school districts and the \$ 11,965,250.00 savings to the state of Texas since the program's inception in 2006, there is a profound social impact as well. The social effect of enhancing high school graduation rates and educating everyone in school benefit society as a whole, since education of individuals has a rippling effect on future generations.

The LUCHA program's implementation is not the same in every district. This program cannot have standardized implementation procedures, since each school district has different resources and student population. Effective and successful use of the program is further complicated because of the needed participation of various departments within schools and districts. While some districts are enthusiastic and recruit their best personnel for the program, others do not show that commitment and limit the program's potential before it even starts. (Gutiérrez-González, 2009)

When a Spanish-speaking newcomer is placed in the LUCHA program several things happen. The student needs to have the counselor schedule his/her classes. If the student has his/her transcript available, this is provided to the counselor. The counselor requests a transcript analysis from the LUCHA program known as the Graduation Credit Analysis (GCA). This analysis is completed in an average of two weeks. The counselor receives the transcript analysis with the student's detailed academic history, which includes an analysis of the student's prior education in Mexico and the recommended academic credits as they compare to the requirements of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the state academic standards. This is one of the critical connections where binational cooperation is vital, as course names do not accurately indicate their content. The program's evaluating agency in Texas needs extensive reference material to evaluate curriculum from Mexico that is not standardized throughout the country. The GCA recommends that the student be granted credits that count towards graduation for those classes successfully completed in Mexico that, based on their content, are comparable. The student is then placed in core content online courses in Spanish in the areas of mathematics and science to allow the student to continue an academically challenging and beneficial course of study while he/she continues to learn English.

If the student described above does not have his/her transcripts, the school can request them to the LUCHA program. Binational relationships have helped speed up this process to the benefit of the students, districts and the state. If the student had interrupted schooling with very little or no documentation of completed academic work, diagnostic assessments in Spanish are available to test the student readiness for high school course content.

Cultural Challenges in a New Educational System

Educational systems have their own cultural understanding, which represents a challenge to anybody who is not acquainted with their intricacies. The LUCHA program tries to bridge the cultural differences between students and school staff as one benefit of providing its various services. Some examples of challenges students face are the following: The use of the student's transcripts for purposes of verification and course content is less common in Mexico

than in the U.S. In the U.S., student transcripts are a must to move a student from school. In Mexico, the grade report cards are sufficient for this purpose. In Mexico, the *Certificado de 3o. de Secundaria* (Certificate of Completion of Middle School) has overriding validity that supercedes the student's middle school transcript. In the U.S., certificates of completion do not provide adequate documentation to place a student in the next grade level; schools request student's transcripts to analyze academic content course by course. Thus, grade report card and the *Certificado de 3o. de Secundaria* in the U.S. lack the official validity given in Mexico. Students and their parents, who are new to the U.S. educational school system, sadly learn this lesson on the spot. This cultural difference accounts for the perception of the Mexican document's validity in some schools where in the eyes of many counselors, the grades the Mexican newcomer brings to school lack official validity.

The Nature of a Binational Cooperation Program and its Challenges

After four years of operation, the UT liaison network in Mexico is vast. Most Mexican states have helped LUCHA in some way. (See Figure 2. Map of Mexico) The map and the effort it represents dispel the common but erroneously held notion that this is simply a border program, or that the students who attend school in the Rio Grande Valley are only from Northern Mexican states that border the United States.

Figure 2
Map of Mexico. Darker shade indicates the Mexican states that have collaborated with the LUCHA program



Like other services that LUCHA offers, that of obtaining a transcript from Mexico has been refined and adjusted over time. Although not perfect, a lot of the success of this process is due to the information gathering system LUCHA has now in place. The process improvements were the result of a myriad of bicultural-binational encounters among LUCHA staff members. For example, the preparation of the Online Enrollment System forms where the prior academic information of the student is requested was in a way a painstaking and long process.

One might think that the main challenge of acquiring transcripts and analyzing their contents in a timely way rests with the academic experts, but this is only partially correct. The process of requesting transcripts points out another daunting challenge –that of cultural differences between the two countries as reflected in their use of language, since words and expressions in Spanish may carry a different meaning on each side of the border. This is particularly tricky in relations between Spanish-speaking Latinos in Texas and Mexicans whose only language is Spanish, and whose cultural frame of reference is Mexican. A challenge is to overcome the resistance, whether conscious or otherwise, of the actors in one country to the customs and manners of the other.

LUCHA Program Success

The LUCHA program started operations in the fall of 2006 in three school districts in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. A year later, it had expanded operations to 12 school districts. At present, after four years, the LUCHA program is present in 29 school districts in the state of Texas. LUCHA has analyzed over 1,570 transcripts and recommended over 10,570 high school credits to be awarded to students with prior schooling in Mexico.

There have been over 30 students who graduated from high school with help received from the LUCHA program. The program has proven to be an effective academic resource for English Language Learners with prior schooling in Mexico. In Brownsville alone, the LUCHA program was instrumental in bridging the academic achievement gap between mainstream and academically challenged students. This accomplishment contributed to the overall district excellence which brought Brownsville ISD national recognition. (BISD, 2008) Although, students are not systematically tracked after graduation, there is evidence that shows that some graduates of the LUCHA program are pursuing higher education and several have joined the U.S. armed forces.

CONCLUSIONS

Economic global trends influence social change and have been a critical factor in population mobility. The LUCHA program demonstrates that in response to a mobile student population, binational cooperation eases the task of educating immigrant students and makes possible the 'better future' which drove their parents to the United States.

Furthermore, the article demonstrates that there is not only hope but opportunities for solutions-oriented binational collaboration in education amidst the immigration debate that has polarized public opinion in recent years. The potential success of this effort is increased and stabilized by the financial commitment to its development by both countries.

The article points out educational challenges that Mexican immigrant students face and suggests a loss of human resource potential when immigrant newcomers are tracked towards dropping out of school. This affects negatively both, the U.S. and Mexico. Although there have been attempts to increase the academic performance of immigrant students, there is no other program in the U.S. that has reached as many high school students and saved as much money for school districts as the LUCHA program at UT Austin has.

The collaboration of the Mexican government to ease access to needed information to perform the transcript analysis and obtain online education in Spanish has made the LUCHA program possible. The article also briefly sheds light on the very particular and painstaking effort needed by educational agencies of participating countries to create and maintain rigorous oversight of credit granting from the system of one country to another at high school level. The negative and prejudiced attitude of many towards Mexico and its educational system in particular is a testimony to the precision and integrity of those who work in both countries to help students receive appropriate credit.

Although not addressed directly, the article and the program itself point to the need for new professional expertise for which there is presently no formal training, in transcript evaluation. In the same way that translators, interpreters and bilingual education teachers are recognized as necessary bridges to gap language and culture, there is a great need for those in the educational field to gain this bicultural, multi-national expertise in dealing with the artifacts-transcripts and other documents that flow from one country to another in benefit of the students.

A well-educated populace is the wish of all open-minded cultures. It can easily be understood that regardless of which side of the blurring border the present-day immigrant high school students find themselves, the quality and extent of their education will contribute to the economic well-being and social stability of both countries.

There is then a need to expand the LUCHA program or to create similar programs to bolster the academic performance of high school newcomers.

At present, there is no other program as large as Language Learners at the University of Texas at Austin (LUCHA) that is as vital and carries the endorsement of the Mexican government (Calderón, 1996; Petró, 2003; Zúñiga, 2000; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2004)

Also as suggested in the article, even with useful services, a strong commitment, including financial support, on the part of districts is needed to make possible increased opportunities for students to benefit from the LUCHA program. The financial as well as humanitarian benefits are demonstrable and are hopefully just the beginning of the creative expression of two nations which claim to be committed to education for all.

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