

**FROM FARMWORKER TO FARMER:
AN EVALUATION OF THE
AGRICULTURE AND LAND-BASED TRAINING ASSOCIATION
SMALL FARMER EDUCATION PROGRAM**

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Executive Summary

The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) is a nonprofit, community-based organization with the mission of “advancing economic viability, social equity and ecological land management among limited-resource and aspiring farmers.” One of ALBA’s main programs is the Small Farmer Education Program (Programa Educativo para Pequeños Agricultores – PEPA). This six-month, Spanish-language training program provides aspiring farmers with the opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to establish a small farm enterprise. Important elements found throughout the educational curriculum are the fundamentals of risk management in operating a diverse farm enterprise.

In order to better understand the PEPA program’s impacts and identify ways to improve the program, ALBA commissioned the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS) to conduct an external evaluation of the program. The evaluation consisted of in-depth face-to-face interviews with 35 PEPA program graduates –18 that are currently farming and 17 that are not, and key informant interviews with ten stakeholders familiar with ALBA and the PEPA program.

Reasons for Entering Program

Farmers and non-farmers entered the PEPA program to start their own farm and learn additional agricultural skills. More farmers than non-farmers entered the program with the goal of starting their own farm, while half of both groups enrolled with the goal of learning additional skills, including organic agriculture, agriculture in general, soil science, pest control, animal husbandry and marketing.

Thirteen (72%) farmers and seven (41%) non-farmers felt the PEPA program had helped them achieve their objectives. Farmers appreciated acquiring new agricultural skills and access to land and equipment. Non-farmers were more likely to feel that the program had met their objectives if they did not enter the program with the expectation of starting their own farm. Conversely, non-farmers whose primary goal was to learn about agriculture in general were more likely to report that the program had met their objectives.

Implementation of Recommended Practices

Respondents who are currently farming were asked if they had implemented practices recommended in the course and whether the program had provided them with sufficient information on production and recordkeeping as fundamentals of risk management. Very high rates of implementation (over 80%) were reported for practices including preparing a soil fertility plan, calculating crop densities, installing drip irrigation, operating a water pump, and maintaining records of farm expenses and income. Conversely, respondents reported particularly low rates (below 50%) of implementation in areas such as conducting and utilizing the results of soil analyses, implementing a water quality management plan, developing a diverse cropping plan, obtaining loans and maintaining an Individual Development Account.

When asked about the most useful skills learned at PEPA, most farmers focused on agricultural production. Several also noted that it was valuable to learn about the administrative aspects of farming, such as the process for obtaining organic certification, where to get agricultural licenses and permits, and how to keep farm records on the computer. Respondents also cited other, less

tangible skills gained as a result of the program, including improved communication skills and higher levels of confidence.

The Farmer Experience

Respondents are currently farming on a mean of 9.9 acres and a median of 2.5 acres of land. The most commonly planted crops are high-value crops such as strawberries, summer squash, peas, beets and tomatoes. Respondents sell their products to a variety of outlets, including direct markets and wholesalers. Overall, ALBA Organics accounts for 37% of all product sold by respondents, brokers account for 34%, direct marketing to stores accounts for 21% and farmers' markets account for 7% of all sales. Personal savings are by far the most commonly reported form of financing on the respondents' farms, followed by loans from family members and contractors. Virtually none of the farmers report access to more formal credit, from banks or governmental agencies. As of this writing, and since being interviewed, two farmers have obtained loans. In addition to ALBA, most farmers obtain information and technical assistance from organic fertilizer, pesticide and seed salespeople, other farmers and the Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner's Office. Approximately half also report contact with California FarmLink, which helps farmers access farmland through lease or purchase, and helps them to strengthen their finances through financial literacy and equity building programs.

The Non-Farmer Experience

Six non-farmers had worked as independent farmers after completing the PEPA program, for an average of two years. Reasons for not continuing to farm included difficulties with sales, not being able to make enough money to live on, the uncertainty involved in depending on farm income, and living too far away from the land at ALBA. Respondents who did not work as independent farmers after completing the course cited a variety of reasons for not doing so, including a lack of financial resources to start farming, not wanting to give up steady employment, and inability to meet the physical demands of farming. ***Nonetheless, several non-farmers reported that the skills they learned at ALBA have translated to benefits in their current jobs.***

Challenges

The eighteen farmers and six non-farmers that had farmed after completing the PEPA course were asked about the challenges they faced as independent farmers. Finding good markets for products, having to work off-farm, and plant diseases and pests were among the top challenges reported by both groups.

Differences Between Farmers and Non-Farmers

No major differences were found between farmers and non-farmers in terms of demographic characteristics such as gender, age, time in the U.S., documentation status, education, literacy, or prior farming experience. Nonetheless, PEPA graduates that are currently farming report significantly higher levels of access to unpaid family labor than respondents who had attempted to farm but are no longer doing so.

Participant Outcomes

At the time of their enrollment in the PEPA program, the majority of respondents worked as permanent agricultural workers. After completing the PEPA program, thirteen (76%) non-farmer

respondents were working at the same jobs and nine (50%) farmers continued to work off-farm. ***Non-farmers report a mean increase of nearly \$1,000 in yearly income after completing the PEPA program.*** It was more difficult to assess changes in income among farmers, as most were unable to report net income from farming. Nonetheless, eight (57%) farmers reported a net profit, while six (43%) reported losses.

Respondents reported gaining new skills as a result of this program, including better financial management, improved computer skills, and improved literacy skills. ***Additionally, approximately 80% of both farmers and non-farmers reported improved self-esteem as a result of this program. Respondents also cited improved communication skills, feeling more confident, and feeling more connected to people around them.***

Participant Recommendations

Recommendations for improving this program included requests for more field experience, particularly for those with limited agricultural experience, and more emphasis and information on marketing and direct marketing. Various respondents also recommended greater clarity and transparency regarding how selling through ALBA Organics works, as well as a more realistic assessment of the risks inherent in farming. Some respondents also suggested that there be improved coordination between farmers and ALBA staff, so that farmers better understand and feel part of decisions affecting them.