

TALKING WITH GRADUATES:

PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF
THE AGRICULTURE AND LAND-BASED TRAINING
ASSOCIATION'S FARMER EDUCATION PROGRAM (PEPA)
AND SMALL FARM BUSINESS INCUBATOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary of the key findings of the 2010-11 evaluation conducted by the California Institute for Rural Studies

The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) is a non-profit organization located in Monterey County, California. ALBA's overarching objective is to “cultivate organic farmers” by creating new farmers and agricultural leaders, developing marketing alternatives and opportunities for small-scale and limited resources farmers, and protecting natural resources and enhancing biodiversity.

To achieve this objective, ALBA operates a variety of programs. At the core of ALBA's programs are the Farmer Education Program, or PEPA (the Spanish acronym for Programa Educativo para Agricultores) and the Small Farm Business Incubator, which are intended to provide participants with the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to successfully establish a successful small farm business. Historically the intended audience for the program has been socially disadvantaged, limited-resource, immigrant Latino farmworkers aspiring to become farmers. However, in 2008, ALBA expanded the audience to include aspiring farmers who do not qualify as socially-disadvantaged by USDA definitions with a target of 80% of enrollees being low-income or very-low-income families. Approximately 25 people enroll in the program each year and low-income target has been met each year since 2008.

PEPA is a six-month, intensive education and training program that includes classroom instruction and field-based training. The course covers:

- Organic production practices
- Crop planning
- Farm equipment use and maintenance
- Irrigation methods
- Business planning and small business management
- Marketing and communications

The Small Farm Business Incubator is a business incubation program in which PEPA graduates can establish and develop a small farm in a low-risk environment. The program includes:

- Decreasing subsidy of land rents for up to six years
- Fee-based access to basic farm equipment
- Fee-based access to irrigation water through a shared irrigation system
- Ongoing technical and business development assistance

Additionally, ALBA operates ALBA Organics, a social venture business featuring a fresh produce distributor and marketing education for program participants, graduates and other small farmers in the region.

EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

This evaluation was initiated to assess ALBA's efforts to improve business and education opportunities and impact the success of beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers. In addition we evaluated the program design and implementation to identify areas for enhancement so that ALBA can refine and improve the PEPA program.

The specific objectives of this evaluation include the following:

- Determine the extent to which ALBA has provided an opportunity for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers to gain access to farming resources and business development assistance.
- Assess the level of satisfaction with the PEPA program among program graduates.
- Identify challenges and barriers to operating a farm business and factors that prevent some program graduates from starting a farm business.
- Outline specific areas that may require greater attention in the program curriculum and areas in which ALBA could improve their program.
- Identify the extent to which ALBA has had an impact on limited-resource, minority residents, who are primarily farmworkers by providing opportunities for these community members.
- Highlight best practices for those organizations who educate beginning and socially-disadvantaged farmers.

METHODS

To gain a greater understanding of the impact of the PEPA program and the experience of program participants, ALBA hired the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS) to conduct an external evaluation. This evaluation follows-up a baseline evaluation conducted by CIRS in 2005. CIRS conducted 60 interviews with program graduates between the months of May 2010 through December 2010. Although the in-depth interviews provided a wealth of information about the participant experience of the PEPA program, the evaluation is limited by this sole method of inquiry. Individual perspectives do not necessarily take into consideration contextual information that is unknown to the participant. Therefore, without additional independent data sources it is not possible to make conclusions about the program beyond the scope of participant experiences.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

KEY OUTCOMES

OPERATING A FARM BUSINESS

- Based on the interviews with the 60 program graduates, slightly more than 50% (31) of the graduates reported operating a farm business. The number of years reported by farmers for operating a farm business range from a minimum of six months to a maximum of 22 years, with a mean of 4.6 years and a median of three years. Twelve farmers have been in business for four years or more.
- Nineteen (61%) of the 31 farmers provided farm revenue figures for the previous year. Based on these figures, the mean farm revenue was \$32,026, with median revenue of \$30,000. The minimum revenue reported was \$500 and the maximum reported was \$125,000.
- Seventy-four percent of farmers reported earning a profit from their farm. Slightly more than one-third of those reporting a profit indicated that it took three years to earn a profit. Nearly a quarter of the farmers earned a profit within the first year.

- The majority of the responding farmers held another farm related job in addition to operating their farms. While eight (26%) farmers operate their farm business full-time and do not have another job, among those, only three indicated that 100% of their household income came from their farm. Conversely, twelve (40%) farmers indicated receiving less than 25% of their household income from farming.
- Among the 29 PEPA graduates who indicated that they were not currently operating an independent farming business, 9 (31%) reported having had a farming business in the past. And 52% of all responding non-farmers have plans to start a farming business. Eight non-farmers indicated job improvements since participating in the PEPA program.

ACCESS TO LAND

- Thirty-nine graduates were farming or had farmed at ALBA. The average acreage under cultivation by farmers ranges from a minimum of 1/2 acre to a maximum of 20 acres, with a mean of 4.8 acres and a median of 3.5 acres.
- The total number of acres currently under cultivation by farmers is 149, with 87 acres cultivated at ALBA and 62 acres leased or owned apart from ALBA.
- Seventy-seven percent of responding farmers have increased cultivated acreage over time while 29% of farmers have decreased cultivated acreage from their maximum.
- Nearly one-third (10) of the farmers reported cultivating land apart from ALBA. Five (16%) farmers own the land on which they are farming.

ACCESS TO MARKETS

- Twenty (65%) of responding farmers marketed their product through ALBA Organics with eight (40%) farmers marketing 100% of their product through ALBA Organics. Forty-eight percent of all product was marketed through ALBA Organics.
- Sixty percent (23) of responding farmers had gained access to other marketing channels apart from ALBA Organics, including farmers' markets, other direct markets, and wholesale distributors. Nearly half of the (48%, 15) farmers sold their product using a diversified marketing strategy.

FARM FINANCING

- Five (16%) farmers reported receiving commercial loans to finance their farming operations. Only three farmers reported the institution providing the loan; two farmers received loans from California Coastal Rural Development Corporation and one farmer received a loan from the Women's Business Education and Loan Program of El Pájaro Community Development Corporation.

OTHER OUTCOMES

- Some graduates reported other positive outcomes after participating in the PEPA program. A third of the graduates reported increased self-esteem and 25% reported increased ability to manage finances. Ten graduates reported improved housing status. Conversely, five graduates reported negative changes including loss of job or house; however, three of these specifically acknowledged that the economic downturn contributed to their losses.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Overall the PEPA Program met the expectations of participants. Sixty-five percent of graduates reported entering the PEPA program with the goal of becoming an independent farmer with slightly over 50% achieving that goal. Eighty-two percent of all respondents felt that the program helped them to achieve their objectives for entering into the program. Additionally, over two-thirds of all respondents reported feeling “very prepared” (22, 37%) or “prepared enough” (19, 32%) to operate a farm business.

CLASSROOM THEORY AND EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION

In general, the classroom experience and the educational content of the program were well received by program participants. Among all of the program components, the knowledge gained (information and theory) was the most often cited benefit of the PEPA program. Some areas participants felt needed more attention include: pest control, marketing, irrigation and organic theory.

Many participants recognized the value of the practical field experience that they received in the PEPA course. However, a large number of participants emphasized that they would have liked more practical experience in the program.

A few additional areas that frustrated some participants regarding program design include translation issues literacy limitations, differences in farming experience levels, and course timing.

SMALL-FARM BUSINESS INCUBATOR: ACCESS TO LAND AND RESOURCES

Respondents’ experience renting land from ALBA was variable. Slightly more than half of all the responding graduates who had leased land from ALBA felt that their experience leasing land from ALBA was positive, while about a third provided negative comments about their experience, and a few individuals had mixed feelings about their experience. A third (20, 4 farmers and 16 non-farmers) of the graduates who participated in the survey indicated that they did not lease land from ALBA. Some of the reasons provided by participants for not leasing land from ALBA include: inconvenient location, timing and lack of availability, conflict or frustration with staff, lack of support or follow through by ALBA, expense, risk, poor land or too much pest pressure, not enough labor support, already had land, job offer, and not interested.

Technical assistance was one area which respondents felt needed improvement. While a few respondents expressed appreciation for the technical assistance that they received at ALBA, several respondents emphasized the need for more technical assistance while farming at the Small Farm Business Incubator, especially for recent graduates. A few farmers mentioned the need for more assistance in pest control.

Assistance with marketing was one of the most often cited areas in which participants would have liked to have had more support from ALBA. While a few respondents remarked that they found the marketing assistance from ALBA helpful, many participants expressed concerns regarding the extent and quality of the marketing assistance provided.

Only nine farmers (29%) reported seeking help from an outside agency for technical assistance and the majority of the farmers who reported utilizing the services of outside agencies were “non-traditional” (Anglo and not socially-disadvantaged) students in the program. Moreover, only three “traditional” students reported utilizing the services of outside agencies.

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Many survey respondents expressed gratitude and appreciation for the program and the hard work on behalf of the program staff. On the other hand, several participants reflected on issues of concern regarding program implementation. Some of the concerns expressed by participants include: the lack of staff expertise and farming experience, lack of availability of staff, impression that ALBA personnel were not very interested in, or engaged with, the program participants, and perception of inequitable treatment of people in the program (especially with access to land and ALBA Organics). Some of the perceptions of inequality related to ALBA Organics may have to do with an unclear relationship among ALBA, ALBA Organics and the PEPA program. In addition to clarifying the role of ALBA Organics, some participants pointed out a need for more communication in the program in general.

LESSONS LEARNED

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO OPERATING A FARMING BUSINESS

Respondents reported numerous challenges and barriers associated with operating or starting a farm business. Many of the same issues that challenge farmers also serve as barriers for non-farmers, including:

- Marketing (knowledge and access)
- Access to financial resources
- Access to land
- Lack of practical experience
- Lack of production knowledge and skills
- Pest control
- Level of risk involved with starting a business
- Labor

Additional challenges cited by farmers include weed control and production timing. For non-farmers, additional barriers mentioned include:

- Lack of time to dedicate to farming operation (due to job)
- Lack of ability to communicate in English
- Lack of help or partner
- Lack of knowledge about irrigation methods

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS AS A FARMER

According to responding farmers, the most important factors contributing to their success as a farmer include: family, markets, knowledge, and skills. Based on the interview data, additional factors that appear to contribute to successful outcomes as a farmer among all PEPA participants include:

- Interest in farming and stated objectives for participating in the PEPA program
- Maintaining a farm-related job in addition to a farm business
- Family support
- Access to capital through personal savings and informal sources such as friends and family

- Willingness to dedicate full-time to their farming operation regardless of holding a second job
- Diversified marketing and/or direct marketing strategy
- Gaining access to small plots of land for lease or purchase

IDENTIFIED NEEDS AND NECESSARY SUPPORT

- Increased assistance accessing financing (formal and informal)
- Increased assistance gaining access to markets apart from ALBA
- Practical experience opportunities during the course
- Increased technical assistance
- Increased assistance in gaining access to land
- Long-term skill development opportunities
- Increased assistance in business skill development and cultural and linguistic navigation

PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase “hands-on” learning opportunities in the course
- Develop a more comprehensive “hands-on” marketing component to the program
- Increase communication, transparency, clarity of PEPA program administration and the role of ALBA Organics
- Develop review board or oversight committee to act as intermediary between farmers and staff
- Increase access to capital through financial aid program
- Increase long-term support for program graduates
- Address different learning styles (needs) and experience levels
- Additional content emphasis and course design

To obtain a copy of the full report, contact:

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