

JENNIFER GUNSCH

INTERVIEW ON MIGRANT EDUCATION

EXPLANATION OF PURPOSE OF THIS INTERVIEW:

This interview is part of a semi-structured interview series to obtain perspectives from experts on a wide range of border issues. These interviews are posted on the website of the Trans-Border Institute as a source of public information about the border. The interview may also be cited in academic research publications produced by the Trans-Border Institute. If you have any concerns about the transcription, posting, or citation of this interview, please contact us at the Trans-Border Institute (transborder@sandiego.edu) at any time to make corrections or identify any concerns.

INTERVIEW:

What is your position within the California school system? Could you briefly explain your specific role as an individual?

I work with a student support program whose goal is to insure Migrant student graduation from high school. I am an adviser to this student population. I encourage said youth to stay in school, to graduate, and to pursue higher education so they can have better opportunities in life. I mentor students to insure that they know about college requirements, scholarship opportunities, financial aid, important high school tests, and how they can impact their communities. A significant amount of my time is dedicated to help students recover credits when they are credit deficient.

What is your educational background? How did you become involved with this work? Is this the type of work you always saw yourself doing?

I have worked with youth for the last 15 years. I have had other types of positions within the organization for which I work. I didn't originally start out along this path, but I am certainly glad to be involved in this type of work. I love working with young people, and to make a difference in their lives.

Many people are concerned with the increasing number of immigrant students in the California public school system, do you think non-migrant students are suffering as a result of the special attention needed by many of the migrant students?

I don't believe that this is the case. Education is a right guaranteed to all young people by the United Nation's charter; it is not a privilege only for some. Immigrant students enrich the cultural diversity of campuses and expose other students to different perspectives. If anything, immigrant students contribute towards a better understanding of minority

groups, and the issues that affect them. Diversity fosters understanding. In my opinion, this is of particular importance in an increasingly “global” world, and in the border region.

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and the movement toward standards-based education reform, do you feel that migrant students and students who attend schools with high numbers of migrant students are at a disadvantage? What are your thoughts on a more comprehensive education reform that would provide schools with the funding and attention that they need for their students to succeed?

I believe that high academic standards should be expected of all students, whether they are immigrants or not. Rigorous courses will make students better prepared to succeed in higher education institutions. However, students, who are learning English as a second or third language, do find themselves at a disadvantage with some of the testing, like the California High School Exit Exam, which would naturally be easier for students that have used English as a dominant language from the onset. And of course, you know that much has been said about tests that measure college preparedness: whether they are socio-economically or culturally biased, or used as a means of selectivity.

In regard to funding for schools, I believe that education should be one of the highest priorities in a society that values innovation, competency, and creativity in its individuals. Schools should be appropriately funded so they can provide quality educational opportunities for all students. If a society invests in it's youth, it will insure prosperity in it's future. At the very least it will be composed of individuals who will know how to confront challenges and surpass them successfully.

In my opinion, it is myopic to continue cutting educational resources. We need excellence in education, more than ever, to respond to the serious problems that population demands and finite resources will present to us in the future.

Do the migrant students you work with feel accepted in their communities, particularly in their schools? What do you think are their greatest obstacle in terms of cultural adaptations?

In general, I cannot say that these students feel entirely integrated or accepted in the greater society. I perceive that immigrants feel a deep uprooting from all they have known and valued. The resulting cultural shock is an ever-present factor in their lives. They also struggle with acquiring a high degree of English language proficiency. Because it requires extraordinary effort to reach the desired competencies, some students feel discouraged and don't have a clear view of success in their lives. However, there are also many, who will not allow anything or anyone to deter them from attaining their educational goals and of being productive members of their communities.

Are you aware of the legal status of the migrant students that you work with? Have you ever experienced a situation in which an undocumented migrant student was unaware of the fact that they were undocumented? How does their legal status impact your ability to help the students?

I am not allowed to elicit this type of information from my students. Unofficially, however, many of them disclose their migratory status to me. I know of a case where the student was unaware of her migratory status. It was a devastating reality for her to wake up to. I do not differentiate between students who I know to be legal, and those who have informed me otherwise. I make sure that I provide appropriate information and encouragement to AB540 students who are in the process of becoming legal residents of the country, so they can also access a college education.

What are your thoughts on the Dream Act, which has recently been re-introduced to Congress as of March 26, 2009? Would the passage of this act have a significant impact on the lives of many of the students you work with?

I am a strong believer that the Dream Act would alleviate the stress and uncertainty that many immigrant students face. These young people pray for the day when their lives will be normal, and free of the fear of incarceration or deportation derived from circumstances over which they've had no control.

I also know that there are many young people with brilliant minds who will attain college degrees, and can potentially make significant contributions to our society, who struggle with uncertainty and even despair, on a daily basis. They wrestle with questions such as: What will become of them, after their efforts to obtain a college degree have been successful? What about the time they've invested; will it pay off? Will they be able to finish school, or will they be deported? Are they not entitled to have a normal, productive life? Why are they placed in this position? Why are there no paths to legalization? Will they be able to work after their graduation from college? Is all this insecurity worth the effort? Is there someone out there who cares? Will there ever be a possibility of legalization? What if their parents are deported? Will things be all right at last?

The border region confronts unique educational challenges, including lower high school completion rates and higher rates of bilingualism than average in the rest of Mexico and the United States. Do you think that this places a challenging disadvantage on the border region or do you think there is a unique advantage present in this situation that suggests the potential for the border region to flourish?

Knowledge is power. There are very specific reasons for the high rate of students dropping out of school. This affects all students in the lower socio-economic strata of our society. There are few resources and viable programs to encourage students to pursue higher education, while there are many challenges, both, in their homes and in their communities that compel them to quit. The result is sadly predictable: higher incarceration rates parallel to less education.

Having two languages is a definite plus in the border region. Many countries encourage the acquisition of multiple languages. Rather than seeing this as a disadvantage, I see it as a positive factor that not only allows better communication between individuals, but also fosters economic and cultural exchange between nations.

How have the increased raids including the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants affected your community, particularly the students you work with? Has the language of criminalization surrounding undocumented immigration posed a challenge for your students? Do you think that this mentality has been internalized by migrants or do you think it is something they have been able to overcome?

I work in a community that is overtly anti-immigrant, which has a police department that has been constantly accused of racial profiling and anti-immigrant policies that lead to the division of families. The students live in a city that they often find hostile. I know of many instances of parent and or student deportations. The strains that these facts place on the families are quite taxing and act as great impediments to student success. The schools are also a reflection of their community; therefore, many of the students feel disconnected from them. The demeaning language used in the media does promote hatred and contempt against immigrants. The students do not believe themselves to be inferior or less deserving of human dignity than anyone else should have.