

Exploring Undergraduate Research Experiences for Latinx College Students From Farmworker Families

Hopkins Press Podcast Transcript

Season 3 Episode 3

29 August 2024

Rahne Alexander

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander and I am the senior publicist for the journals division of Hopkins Press. Today we are talking with the authors of a recent study that appears in *Journal of College Student Development*, entitled “Exploring Undergraduate Research Experiences for Latinx College Students From Farmworker Families.” Notably, this study from the January-February 2022 issue of *Journal of College Student Development* takes a novel and inclusive approach to the ways undergraduate research programs engage underrepresented and minoritized students. And all through 2024 this article has consistently been among the most-read Hopkins Press articles on Project MUSE. We'll make this article free to read through the end of September. Check the show notes for links to the article and information about the authors. And with no further ado, welcome everybody to the Hopkins Press Podcast. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Do you mind if I have each of you introduce yourself?

Sneha Amaresh

I'll kick us off. My name is Sneha Amaresh. I'm currently a graduate student working towards getting my Master's in Public Health at Emory University. I was a public health undergraduate student at East Carolina University at the time the study was conducted. In the study, I was one of the assistant researchers, and under the guidance of Dr. Lee I helped workshop the documents to get IRB approval, I conducted the interviews with the students from farmworker families, and I coded them to find our themes.

Joseph Lee

I'm Joseph Lee, and I'm a professor of health education and promotion at East Carolina University, and have been working in digital inclusion and doing some work with farmworker health for the last few years.

Raúl Gámez

My name is Raúl Gámez. I'm a PhD candidate in higher education at the University of Michigan. Dr. Lee and I have been working together for a long time in other nonprofit work

in North Carolina, and that's how I came into this project, just helping with the writing, and given my focus in higher education, that's how I came in after the project was underway.

Rahne Alexander

Well, thank you all for being here, and congratulations are in order! People are reading your article. All year long, your work has been charting amongst your most read through Project MUSE—often the second most-read. And in May 2024 it was the most-read article that month. We love to see the research in our journals getting read! So it seems that the central question of this study is, “What insights do students from farmworker families, particularly of Latinx origin, possess that can inform undergraduate research programs?” Can you talk a little bit about this for those who have yet to read the article?

Sneha Amaresh

I can talk about the three main themes that we took out of the research, which were that—and this was through interviewing the students—we learned that the research and research experiences should consider students’ lived experiences. And this was incredibly pertinent and relevant to our research, because all of the students were from farmworker families, and so their background and that representation is important in the research that they do. The second theme was that with research opportunities should come mentorship and resources. And the third theme was when trying to include students—especially minority students—in research, it's important to include targeted marketing and outreach efforts.

Joseph Lee

My hope is that this is really useful to folks who are building and designing research experience programs at universities. I'm really pleased that people are paying attention to it and our work. Raúl, you're in the education field. Do have insight onto why this has taken off and why we're getting such good readership?

Raúl Gámez

Well, I think particularly thinking about who the participants were, I think oftentimes we tend to generalize in education the experiences of immigrant students or the experiences of Latinx students. And I think our findings and particularly just focusing and understanding the lived experiences of students is important, and I think we'll talk a little bit more on that and a little bit about the framework we used, but I think it's really seeing this particular group of students as individuals who can actually contribute to the knowledge production in higher education. I think as we complicate what that means in our field, and how, you know, not only *who* can produce research or consume research, but seeing that participants really take ownership of that and create opportunities. So I think the more we think about that, I think is important. I think that's maybe one of the reasons why this paper has maybe struck a chord, for lack of better words, because I think we're in a time where we are really interrogating who belongs in higher education, who can create knowledge, who can access that, and oftentimes we don't see those individuals with the lived experience as the creators of the knowledge that we're trying to create.

Sneha Amaresh

Yeah, and I think we got to see that through the interviewing, the process of students, these students from farmworker families, how they were getting involved in research and what their experiences were like. And specifically we asked about the barriers to research and facilitators that would have been more helpful to them in getting involved in research.

Rahne Alexander

Can you talk a little bit about the origins of this study?

Sneha Amaresh

Yeah, I can start. I actually was taking a class called “Social Justice and Sustainability.” I was taking a seminar, kind of right before this project took off, and it was one of the best classes I took at ECU. And through that I had seen—there was a documentary about farm workers, especially in North Carolina, and that population, I realized, I didn't know that much about. I was incredibly interested in working with them and learning how to surf that community. I was also working with Dr. Lee on some other projects as a research assistant, and he was working with Student Action with Farmworkers, I think it was, and some other organizations like that, and so he helped me form this initial idea about how to get students from farmworker families involved in research, like what the barriers would be to having more minority or underrepresented students be involved in research. And so that's a little bit of how it took off.

Joseph Lee

To add, from my end, we were really starting to build up some grants, and wanted to do a better job of including students and bringing expertise from students and farmworkers and their families into that research, and that was the perfect opportunity to work with Sneha on this to try to make our projects better in how we incorporated students and their experiences. So, really helpful, and we've used it for our subsequent grants. We've used some of the things we learned from this to try to do those better.

Rahne Alexander

So for this study, you used what you call a “rightful presence” framework. Can you talk a little bit about what that means and how that works in your research?

Joseph Lee

I'll start us off, and then Raúl, maybe we'll put you on the spot as the PhD candidate in education. But I think of this as like, instead of just saying we need better diversity and inclusion of people in our research projects and in research, and that we need to diversify and have differences and show differences in who's a researcher, this is sort of flipping that or extending that and saying, “No, it's not just about getting people there. It's about celebrating other perspectives, celebrating that you have a right to be here, and by being here, you add value to the community, to the research, to what you can do and really make

this better.” And that's kind of to me, the exciting piece of this framework, is just that push to sort of recognize that the lived experience and connecting research to some of the power struggles and the injustices that are out there can make our research better and more impactful.

Raúl Gámez

Yeah, and I think one of the things also that I that I think really caught our eye when we found this framework was just really thinking about the systemic barriers that students face. I think in higher education, we are trying as much as possible to move away from deficit thinking, and I think this framework really allows us to put the systemic barriers and highlight those that it is students or have a lot of own knowledge and experience coming in and they have, like Joseph said, the right to be present in the spaces. I think one of the things that this framework also does well, and allows us to do, is not just really talk about students—and migrant students in particular—as abstract to the system, but putting them within and really highlighting the barriers, whether political or otherwise, that have hindered their access. So yes, maybe they haven't been exposed to research, but it's not because they haven't wanted to. Maybe the opportunities were there because of where they went to school, oftentimes in rural areas where schools are underfunded. So it's not a like a choice, necessarily. I myself was a migrant student, and went through a lot of these programs, and I didn't go into research, really, until I was in my early 30s, right? It's not because I didn't necessarily want to do research, but I think some of the things that are highlighted in this research is if I would have had the mentorship, or somebody told me this is what research is about. “Have you considered research because you're asking questions that maybe would be suitable for a research project,” right? I would have probably started research earlier than I did, and I think I've always felt that, “Oh, I'm not good enough for that, because I don't have the skills. I'm not good at math, because research is just *scientific* research,” right? But stories are research. This framework really allowed us to uncover some of that in a way that maybe others might not, and I think really reframing it from deficit to asset base. There's a lot of experienced knowledge that the students bring, and I think it disrupts, not only by that interest, but by them being able to participate in this space. We're already disrupting that traditional mode of learning, and research creation lends itself to really pair well with the stories that students were sharing.

Sneha Amaresh

When we were writing this paper—and I think I don't know if it was Dr. Lee or Dr. LePrevost—who brought up the rightful presence framework in the first place. It was such a seamless fit, and I'm so happy to have it been in the paper, and to have it been related to the to the research and the study.

Rahne Alexander

You also used some data analysis software called NVivo to analyze the response data you received. What was that like? Did you find that the software provided a different dimension to the research or analysis?

Sneha Amaresh

I can talk a little bit about my experience using NVivo. And then we can circle back to Dr. Lee, talking about why we chose NVivo. I was, as you know, a senior in undergrad. It was my first experience really conducting and doing qualitative research. I didn't really know that much about qualitative research in the first place, and being introduced to NVivo, I think in using it, I had a pretty good experience using it. I think it actually contributed to my excitement and passion for qualitative research. Now, basically the interviews were transcribed, using a smooth verbatim protocol, and then uploaded to this software called NVivo. And through NVivo, you kind of highlight and break down the interviews and sort them into these different themes. We used inductive and deductive coding to find themes; those themes were then kind of condensed, and we took out the three biggest ones that we found had the most descriptive quotes and the best evidence.

Joseph Lee

That was really well described! One of the cool things about this is we're interviewing students and recent graduates about research experiences, but at the same time, it was one of your first research experiences. Sneha, can you talk about how that felt?

Sneha Amaresh

The act of coding, or just the research process itself?

Joseph Lee

Yeah, I guess you're asking other students about how they would want to be involved in research, and at the same time, it's one of your first experiences.

Sneha Amaresh

Yeah, that was definitely interesting. It felt kind of meta, in a way, to be like, "Oh, tell me about your research experiences." And then that was my research experience. But I think it was really informative. It felt like, in asking students about their research experiences, I was relating it to how I was conducting research at the very same time, and then being able to code it and then have it be published from start to finish. It just felt so cohesive, and it was all packaged up in this wonderful way. It was a really great experience for me.

Rahne Alexander

I love how multigenerational your research process was for this study—really spanning all levels of the academy, to me it's like one of those great shining moments of inclusivity, what I always want to see the academy do.

Raúl Gámez

Can I add to that? I think it's not only the multi-generational piece, but I think multidisciplinarity. You know, I think we in higher ed tend to be very higher ed only. And I think one of the greatest things about this is collaborating with people from science education and public health, and I think our fields are so interconnected, and the

experiences. And I think, it made not only the product but the process of research so much—in my personal opinion—more enriching and valuable because it's we're not just siloed. I think where there's so much from other fields that we can borrow and use and really expand on that makes the experiences and the research that we produce so much better.

Rahne Alexander

That's just fantastic, I do love a multidisciplinary team! So can you talk a little about your takeaways, and how you see opportunities to build on this work?

Joseph Lee

Actually, we used it for, and we tested a workforce development sort of mini-grant, and we use some of the pieces we learned from this. We brought in mentors as part of that, and then paired students together on research projects. It was small, it was six students at NC State and ECU, but it was really informed by this work and since then, we've both cited this—you'll be glad to know Sneha—and used it, actually, in a National Institutes of Health Community Partnership to Advance Science for Society proposal that was funded, and we included in it a series of undergraduate student research projects built in to inform the larger project, but also with some mentors built in. Those are a couple of things that I hope other people can also use this as sort of a rationale for being able to include in their grants and how they think about incorporating students.

Raúl Gámez

Yeah, and I think that—I wasn't even remotely close to being in a research team when I was an undergrad, but the idea of publishing in a journal seems like, “Only smart people do that kind of thing,” or, like, “really advanced, you have to know this and this.” I think one of the things that I think Joseph was talking about also is students seeing the process from beginning, engaged in the creation of research questions, protocols; engaged from beginning to end and really moving pieces to publication. It has been really nice to see, and I think not necessarily just for like research programs focused on migrant students, but I think for all of them, that component of “What does a final product look like?” One thing that I practice now, also as a mentor to undergraduate students, is providing opportunities involved beyond just the coding process, or gathering literature for the review, right? I see my students and the students that I collaborate with as real collaborators from beginning to end, and I think that's an important piece that comes from here. There's more potential, I think, making visible the people in the students that have been invisible for so long, and how to bring their stories more into center stage of research and processes in academia in general. I think it's something that I think we have more work to do in that area, but I think there's opportunities for expanding this for sure.

Joseph Lee

Yeah, I appreciate that, and I think the one of the cool things I like to try to remind students of, and that partially comes from this and is represented in this paper, is even beyond being a student from a farm worker family, like, if you're a student from rural eastern North

Carolina, or anywhere else, *you have a perspective*, and that can make the research stronger and add value and help us get new or interesting or different questions. Just the way you see it, in the coding of the data can make it stronger than it would have been without you. And that, to me, it's like such a nice piece of what we're trying to do in in in this work.

Rahne Alexander

Thank you. Is there anything we haven't touched on yet?

Joseph Lee

I'd just like to acknowledge and thank our other author, Dr Catherine LePrevost at NC State, who is an agromedicine extension specialist and science education professor, and was a truly wonderful part of the study, and another discipline to bring a lens to this, and a really good mentor, probably actually to all three of us.

Rahne Alexander

Thank you all for your time, and congratulations again. I hope people continue to benefit from this work and the rest of the work that you do!

Raúl Gámez

Thank you.

Sneha Amaresh

Thank you so much.

Joseph Lee

We really appreciate it. Bye all.

Rahne Alexander

Thanks for listening to the Hopkins Press podcast. Check the show notes for links to the article and information about the authors. The music featured in today's episode is by Jean Toba, which you can find on a Free Music Archive, also linked at the podcast information page in the show notes. Thanks for listening, and we hope to see you again next time on the Hopkins Press Podcast.