

# YOUR AMERICAN DREAM

To The Teachers:

In 2004, my wife, Lilly, and I established the Merage Foundation for the American Dream. We believe its mission is important to the nation and its citizens. The Foundation is dedicated to promoting expanded opportunities for immigrants. It hopes to inspire young immigrants to achieve their American Dream. It hopes to help promising immigrant leaders contribute to their communities and to the nation. It hopes to encourage Americans to understand and celebrate the contributions of immigrants to America.

The Foundation's initiatives include:

- The development of award-winning DVDs and educational materials (The American Experience) concerning the history of immigration and the lives of successful American immigrants for use in high schools throughout the nation.
- The provision of stipends and the creation of a Merage Fellows program for outstanding graduating immigrant students nominated by 22 universities throughout the country.
- The development of occasional papers and the convening of Forums concerning the impact of immigration on America and issues concerning immigration.
- The hosting of an annual National Leadership Awards dinner to recognize the significant accomplishments of successful and prominent immigrant citizens.

We are delighted that you want to use the DVDs and educational materials in your classrooms. Paraphrasing Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous American author, the Merage Foundation hopes that the American Dream Experience will help students walk with their feet, work with their hands, speak their own minds and reach their own aspirations.

Paul Merage  
President

To The Teachers:

The Merage Foundation for the American Dream is pleased to send you DVDs and related educational materials for The American Dream Experience. Both describe in vivid terms the history of immigration to America and the lives and contributions of living American immigrants. Both reflect an effort by the Merage Foundation to create a library of DVDs and educational materials for high school teachers and principals throughout the U.S. Based on use of both in over 1200 classrooms last year, the Foundation believes that the American Dream Experience will inspire students—including immigrant students and students from immigrant families—to define and achieve their American Dreams.

We hope that teachers will incorporate the DVDs and educational materials in their lesson plans over a period of several weeks. We encourage teachers to invite local immigrant leaders to watch the DVDs and discuss their content with students. We urge teachers to involve all students, whether immigrants or not, in the planned activities related to the DVDs. Students, if they are not immigrants or children of immigrant families, are likely to be able to trace their roots back to immigrant grandparents, great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents. The Foundation welcomes teacher feedback concerning the impact of the American Dream Experience in the classroom.

Marshall Kaplan  
Executive Director  
Merage Foundations

Elliott Rebhun  
The New York Times  
Upfront/Scholastic Inc.

Donna Dewey  
Dewey Obenchain  
Film Inc.

## THE AMERICAN DREAM EXPERIENCE

### THE MEXICAN IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE



*A family of walnut pickers from Northern California, 1983.  
(California Historical Society)*

#### BACKGROUND: MEXICANS AND AMERICA

From the very beginning, Hispanics have been integral to our history.

Spanish explorers were among the first Europeans to arrive in the New World, beginning with Christopher Columbus. The Italian-born explorer sailed west in 1492 for Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Over the next decade, Columbus made a total of four expeditions, claiming for Spain several Caribbean islands and the territories of Venezuela, Honduras, Panama, and Mexico.

In 1607, the same year the British established their first colony in Jamestown, Virginia, Mexicans founded the city of Santa Fe in what is now New Mexico. As their names suggest, other cities in the Southwest—Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Antonio, to name but a few—also trace their roots to Spanish-speaking founders.

Like their counterparts on the Atlantic coast, Mexican colonists in the Southwest sought liberty and better lives than they had under European colonial powers. In 1821, Mexico successfully declared its independence from Spain, and won self-rule over large parts of the

formerly Spanish territory. But just 14 years later, in 1835, the breakaway state of Texas declared its own independence, causing Mexico to lose its hold over the American Southwest.

Texas voted to annex itself to the United States in 1845, setting in motion events that would lead to the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48). The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war, ceded nearly half of Mexico's territory to the U.S., including much of California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona, and parts of Colorado. In the aftermath, nearly 100,000 Mexican citizens found themselves living in areas ceded to the United States. They didn't cross the border; the border crossed them. The terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo gave them the option to travel south to land still in Mexican hands, or to become U.S. citizens. Although the treaty dictated that Mexican property be "inviolably respected," many Mexicans who stayed faced discrimination and lost their land. But many also contributed greatly to the development of the western states.

The stakes rose when gold was discovered in California just a few days after the treaty's signing. Mexicans

and Americans alike headed to California by the thousands in hopes of striking it rich. But existing animosity between the two groups increased in 1850 when California passed a \$20-a-month foreign miner's tax affecting Mexican gold-diggers.

The boundaries between the U.S. and Mexico have remained fairly constant ever since that war, and for the next 70 years, Mexican immigration was a non-issue. The 2,000-mile-long border between the U.S. and Mexico ran through desolate, unsettled territory. Both governments turned blind eyes to whatever human traffic there was across the border. When the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1833 made it impossible for western railroad builders to import Chinese laborers, they turned to Mexicans instead. Still, fewer than 300,000 Mexicans immigrants were recorded in the U.S.

between 1850 and 1920. It was only in 1924 that the U.S. established the Border Patrol, after larger numbers of Mexicans started moving north to escape the chaos brought about by the Mexican Revolution.

Mexican immigration slowed dramatically during the Depression, when jobs in the U.S. were scarce. In fact, the U.S. sponsored a repatriation program that sent 500,000 Mexicans back across the border. But by 1942, there was a labor shortage in the U.S. as thousands of young Americans went to Europe and Asia to fight in World War II. Although Mexican-Americans fought bravely during that War (and all subsequent U.S. wars), not everybody was happy about the sudden influx of new Mexican immigrants. Tensions boiled over in Los Angeles in 1943 during the "Zoot Suit riots." U.S. sailors and soldiers went on a melee against young Mexican men in zoot suits, which anti-immigrant forces claimed was the uniform of criminals.

Beginning in 1942, the desperate need for agricultural labor led to the creation of the Bracero (guest worker) Program. For two decades, hundreds of thousands of migrant farm workers—primarily from Mexico, but also from Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and other Latin American countries—came to the United States for a growing season, a year, or several years. Braceros were not allowed to apply for citizenship; they were expected to return home at the end of their agreements. But the need for workers was so great that they were allowed to renew their visas over and over again. By 1960, the Census Bureau estimated that braceros comprised more than one-fourth of the nation's seasonal farm workers. To this day, many large-scale agricultural operations, especially in California, depend heavily on a seasonal influx of Mexican workers.

In the early 1950s, while Joseph McCarthy was whipping up hysteria about supposed communists in government, a campaign by border agents called Operation Wetback took aim at Mexican immigrants. Tens of thousands of undocumented individuals were arrested and deported in the summer of 1954.

The U.S. ended the Bracero Program in 1964 under pressure from unions claiming they were losing jobs to guest workers, and from human rights advocates who decried the poor working conditions of the laborers. But demand for cheap agricultural labor continued to increase. So when the Immigration and Naturalization Amendments of 1965 loosened the rules about who could immigrate to the U.S., hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Mexico crossed the border. Finding plentiful work in agriculture and in urban areas and a better standard of living on the U.S. side, many chose not to return.

Mexican immigration grew to unprecedented numbers with each succeeding decade. Legal immigrants from Mexico quadrupled from 453,937 in the 1960s to 1.65 million in the 1980s. More than 2.2 million Mexicans immigrated legally to the U.S. in the 1990s, and an average of 170,000 have arrived each year since 2000. An equal or greater number of immigrants are believed to have crossed into the U.S. without authorization.

The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act provided amnesty for undocumented people who had been living in the U.S. for at least four years. It also promised to crack down on illegal immigration by increasing funding for border enforcement. The immediate result was



Children play in a barrio with downtown Los Angeles in the background, 1946. (USC Digital Archive)

that millions of undocumented immigrants (a large percentage of them from Mexico) became eligible for citizenship. However, the Act's prohibition on knowingly hiring undocumented workers proved difficult to enforce, and the flow of unauthorized immigrants continued.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service estimates that there were 5 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. in 1996, more than half of them from Mexico. The agency estimates that approximately 275,000 people have entered the U.S. illegally each year since then. A more recent estimate, from the Migration Policy Institute, puts the number of undocumented immigrants at 11.6 million as of 2006, and growing by more than half a million a year. Of the total, 6.6 million (57%) came from

Mexico. In all, there were 35 million Latinos living in the U.S. according to the 2000 Census; nearly 21 million of them were of Mexican origins.

As the number of Mexicans seeking a better life in the U.S. continues to increase, so too does the backlash against them. Undocumented immigrants have again become the subject of heated political debate, especially in states like Texas and California, which are home to more than half of all U.S. Latinos. State and federal lawmakers continually propose legislation that would limit immigration, beef up border patrols, outlaw the use of Spanish in schools, or even build a 700-mile-long fence along the Mexican border.

Racism, cultural differences, language barriers, poverty, and public policy have impeded the success of Mexican immigrants in finding upwardly-mobile jobs, a good education, and quality healthcare. In 2007, Bean et al. found that Mexican immigrants and their descendants appear to integrate into the U.S. mainstream more quickly socio-culturally than economically. Economic integration is slower between second- and third-generation Mexican immigrants than between first- and second-generation immigrants. They are integrating economically at a slower rate than the European immigrant groups of the early 20th century. This is particularly the case for undocumented immigrants and their children.

However despite the backlash, most Mexican immigrants, particularly those here legally, are integrating into mainstream America as immigrants from other countries have. Mexicans, for the most part, are hard-working people who contribute to American life. Many are putting down roots in America that now extend back two, three and even four generations. Mexicans currently constitute the largest single group of immigrants to the U.S., and their influence will only increase in future years.

## CLASS DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The Merage Foundation assumes that teachers will view this DVD and read the related materials as part of their development of lesson plans. Before teachers show the DVD and begin the planned activities, they should:

1. Talk about the current national debate over the role of immigrants—both legal and undocumented—in the U.S.
2. Review with students important events in the history of Mexican immigration (see the background section above).
3. Help students understand the significance of terms referred to in the video or that will likely come up in your class discussions, including: land grant, the Alamo, Manifest Destiny, vaqueros, longhorns, Chinese Exclusion Act, Ellis Island, El Norte (the north, i.e. the United States), corrido (song), no saben inglés (they don't know English), Gracias a Dios (thank God), bracero (guest worker), MBA (Masters in Business Administration), Cesar Chavez, barrio (Latino neighborhood), IRCA (Immigration Reform and Control Act), NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), marginalized, Comprehensive Immigration Reform, permanent residency (green card), naturalization, and undocumented.

## THEME ONE: LEAVING BEHIND MEMORIES AND PLACES

The earliest Mexican-Americans were not immigrants. They were living in territory that belonged to Mexico until the Mexican-American War. When the war ended, they were given a choice of becoming U.S. citizens or moving hundreds or thousands of miles south to land that remained Mexican territory.

Many chose to stay and adopt the customs and ideals of a different nation. These new Americans weren't always greeted warmly. Many lost their land and were victims of discrimination. But they often stayed because Mexicans and Americans shared a common dream: of liberty, opportunity, and a better life for themselves and their children.

Whether they crossed a border or a border crossed them, Mexican immigrants—indeed most immigrants—face a delicate balancing act between retaining their heritage and becoming American. Many want to integrate into the American mainstream, but don't want to forget their roots.

### PLANNED ACTIVITY

People often use the words “land,” “country,” and “nationality” interchangeably, but as the story of the first Mexican-Americans demonstrates, those terms are complex and can mean different things in different contexts. Ask students to talk about their feelings about the physical place they live, the United States as a symbol of freedom and opportunity, and the country they call home (usually the U.S., but some immigrants consider their country of birth to be their home country).

Ask students to imagine a scenario in which Canada and the United States go to war, and Canada took possession of the state in which you live, and all of the surrounding states. For example, if you are in California, then California, Oregon, Nevada, and Arizona would become Canadian territory. Tell students that after this hypothetical war, they must choose between staying where they are and becoming Canadian citizens, or traveling hundreds of miles to a state that remains in U.S. hands. Students should write a paragraph or two describing the choice they would make and why.

Ask them to talk about the reasons that would influence their decisions.

- Would their answer change if they had to learn a new language? For example, in some parts of Canada, French is the primary language.
- Would their answer change if they knew they would face discrimination in Canada?
- What if they didn't have the same rights they have in the U.S.? Which of these rights do they value most? Which rights would affect their decision to move or stay?
- Would proximity to other family members play a large role in their choice?

After students have written their paragraph, take a poll to see how many would stay and how many would move to another U.S. state, and write the totals on the board. Discuss their decisions with them.

## THEME TWO: BUILDING A NEW LIFE IN THE U.S.

Mexicans have been coming to the United States in great numbers for more than 50 years. But they haven't always been allowed to stay. From 1942 to 1964, some 4.5 million Mexicans came to the U.S. as *braceros*: guest workers, usually on farms, who were expected to return to Mexico after the growing season.

A year after the Bracero Program ended, the Immigration and Naturalization Amendments of 1965 opened a door to the U.S. that was previously accessible only to European immigrants. Since then, millions of people from Mexico and other countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia have immigrated to the U.S.

But there continue to be many more immigrants seeking the American Dream than U.S. limits allow. With such a disparity in

economic opportunity between the U.S. and Mexico, and with numerous U.S. employers eager to hire workers with few questions asked, policy and laws have not been able to hold back the flood of undocumented immigrants. According to the State Department, it takes between 5 and 15 years for Mexicans with a family member in the U.S. to get a visa that would allow them to immigrate lawfully. Rather than wait that long, many Mexicans ineligible to immigrate legally come north without authorization and build new lives in the U.S.

As noted in the background, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service estimates that nearly 275,000 Mexicans immigrate to the U.S. each year without authorization. The Migration Policy Institute guesses it's nearly twice that number. It estimates that there were 11.6 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. in 2006, more than half of them from Mexico. Immigrants who cross without authorization often live a shadowy, impoverished existence. Many work in an underground economy. Most cannot obtain drivers' licenses, get college loans, or apply for jobs that require proof of citizenship.

### PLANNED ACTIVITY

The most recent round of public debate over immigration, especially Mexican immigration, has tended to focus on how to prevent undocumented immigrants from coming in the future. Suggestions have included making illegal immigration a felony and building a wall. But since the demise of efforts at comprehensive immigration reform, there has been little serious discussion about what should happen to the millions of undocumented people already living in the United States.

Ask students to brainstorm ideas about how to treat undocumented immigrants living in America. For each potential solution, ask students about the pluses and minuses of each idea, why it might or might not succeed. Encourage students to be as imaginative as they can, but if they have trouble coming up with ideas, you can suggest some of the following.

- **Amnesty.** Anyone who can prove U.S. residency is automatically eligible to become a citizen.
- **Pathways to Citizenship.** Undocumented immigrants can obtain citizenship, but must prove their desire to become Americans by paying a fine, doing community service, demonstrating good behavior, passing a U.S. civics test, or joining the armed forces.
- **Imprisonment, Detention, or Deportation.** Undocumented immigrants can be arrested, held, or sent back to their home countries.
- **Employer sanctions.** People who hire undocumented workers face penalties, which would limit jobs for immigrants.
- **Guest worker programs.** A specified number of workers are allowed into the U.S., if there are any jobs particularly in agriculture, for limited periods of time.
- **Nothing.** Any solution would be worse than the problem.

After students have discussed several possibilities, ask them to choose the one they think is the best option, and write a paragraph explaining why. Discuss the content of their paragraphs in the classroom.

**Additional Activity:** Ask students to identify some immigrants who have achieved their American Dream. The person can be a famous politician, a celebrity, an athlete, a musician, or somebody in their own family or neighborhood. The students should discuss why they chose the person they did, where the person immigrated from, what they left behind, and how they are going about achieving (or have already achieved) their American Dream.

## THEME THREE: ACHIEVING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Like the Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles, Russians, Germans, Chinese, Dominicans, Indians, Norwegians and others, Mexicans have come to the U.S. seeking economic opportunity and a better life for themselves and their children. And like these other immigrants, Mexicans have at times been victimized by discrimination and criticized for ostensibly



*United Farm Workers strike near Oxnard, California, 1966.  
(California Historical Society)*

failing to integrate into the mainstream quickly enough. The arguments that are used today, often without evidence, to limit Mexican immigration are some of the same ones used in the past against immigrants from other countries.

Employment signs stating “No Irish Need Apply” were commonplace in the 19th century. In the 1920s, evidence that claimed to be “scientific” was used to argue that immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe came from weaker, less intelligent stock than their blond-haired, blue-eyed counterparts in Northern and Western Europe. In perhaps the greatest humiliation to a group based on nationality, Japanese-Americans were interned during World War II because the U.S. government worried they might give aid and comfort to the enemy.

U.S. immigration law and policy, particularly in the 20th century and even now, has waived between restricting and welcoming immigrants; between making distinctions among skills, country of origin, family status, and race, and providing an open or almost open door for immigration, and even recruiting immigrants.

There are, however, perceived differences between immigration from Mexico and other countries. For one, much of the southwestern part of the United States used to be a part of Mexico, throwing fear in a sometimes vocal minority concerning Mexican nationalism. For another, the 2,000-mile Mexico-U.S. border is the most frequently legally and illegally crossed international border in the world, suggesting to a handful of analysts and nationalists that America will lose its culture, commitment to the legal system, and English language heritage. Some people have used these arguments to contend that Mexicans should be treated differently than other immigrants, and that they are somehow less entitled to pursue the American Dream.

## PLANNED ACTIVITY

Create a single column on the board entitled “Mexicans” and ask students to talk about some of the challenges faced by Mexican immigrants in their efforts to achieve the American Dream. Some of the hurdles they should consider might include:

- Discrimination and racism.
- Language barriers.
- Differences in culture.
- Proximity to home country.
- Impediments to becoming citizens or permanent residents (i.e. *bracero* agreements; long waits for visas).
- Willingness to contribute.
- Ability to integrate into mainstream.

Ask students, in turn, to talk about the country they or their ancestors immigrated from. Create a column on the board for each such country, and compare the challenges faced by immigrants from those countries with the hurdles faced by Mexican immigrants.

After you’ve made columns for four or five countries, ask students to write a short essay that answers the question: “Is Immigration from Mexico Different?” Their essays should talk first about the similarities and differences between Mexican immigrants and those from other countries. Students should then give their opinions on whether the current immigration “problem” should be treated any differently than immigration “problems” of the past, and why or why not.

The Mexican Immigration Experience DVD and planned activities are designed to help students talk about their own American Dreams. Teachers should conclude the planned activities by encouraging students to define and discuss their own American Dreams. If some students find it difficult, ask them to talk about their hopes concerning their future education, jobs, career, marriage, children, family, and contributions to the community. Encourage the students to think about strategies for achieving their American Dreams and developing them as they continue their education.

Teachers should also foster a classroom dialogue concerning student role models. The discussion should focus on what makes a good role model, including such qualities as diligence, ambition, willingness to overcome problems, courage, acceptance of others, and a desire to contribute to their communities.



*Immigrant Rights rally in Philadelphia, 2006.  
(Immigrant Solidarity Network)*

The United States is now engaged in a dialogue on the future of immigration policy. It will likely persist for many years. The issues involved are complex and must be responded to in a thoughtful manner. They relate to how best to secure the nation’s borders; the gap between the American Dream and reality for many in this nation; the best way to increase job opportunities as well as strategies to fill anticipated future job openings of varying skill levels; and how America should respond to poverty and

facilitate family and personal income growth. Above all, the dialogue arouses passionate arguments on the meaning of citizenship and the reasons for providing access or pathways to legal status and naturalization. Because your students will likely be aware of and perhaps involved in their own ways in the dialogue, we hope your classroom becomes a laboratory for civil conversation and a model of the same for the nation. All Americans have a stake in the development of an effective, coherent and decent policy consistent with America’s commitment to justice, the rule of law, fairness, and opportunity.

## RESOURCES

### Print:

- Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, by Roger Daniels (Visual Education Corporation, 2002)
- Mexican Immigration* (from the Changing Face of North America series), by Leeanne Gelletly (Mason Crest Publishers, 2004)
- Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*, by Manuel G. Gonzales (Indiana University Press, 2000)
- The New Americans*, by Michael Barone (Regnery, 2001)
- The Other Face of America: Chronicles of the Immigrants Shaping Our Future*, by Jorge Ramos (HarperCollins, 2002)
- The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.*, Pew Hispanic Center Report, March 7, 2006
- Unauthorized Migrants: Numbers and Characteristics*, Pew Hispanic Center Report, June 14, 2005

### Internet:

- Becoming U.S. Stakeholders: Legalization and Integration among Mexican Immigrants and their Descendants, by Frank D. Bean, et al. <http://www.meragefoundations.com/MFAD%20Pdf%20Applications/Becoming%20US%20Stakeholders.pdf>
- Migration Policy Institute, Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants in the U.S. [www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?id=649](http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?id=649)
- PBS American Experience: The Gold Rush. [www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/peoplevents/p\\_mexicans.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/peoplevents/p_mexicans.html)
- PBS American Experience: The Zoot Suit Riots. [www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zoot/eng\\_filmmore/fd.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zoot/eng_filmmore/fd.html)
- Santa Fe Convention and Visitors Bureau. [www.santafe.org](http://www.santafe.org)
- Texas State Historical Association. *The Handbook of Texas Online*. [www.tsha.utexas.edu](http://www.tsha.utexas.edu)
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*. [www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm)
- U.S. Department of State: Visa Bulletin for December, 2007. [travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/bulletin/bulletin\\_3841.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/bulletin/bulletin_3841.html)

John Rosenthal of Southpaw Communications contributed to the preparation of these educational materials.