



**Jobs for
the Future**

High Rigor, High Support

**The University of California, Riverside Professional and
Global Education Farmworker Advancement Program**

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About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. www.jff.org.

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01. Introduction

For many participants in the University of California, Riverside (UCR) Professional and Global Education (PGE) Farmworker Advancement Program (FAP), returning to school has meant entering an unfamiliar learning environment, taking on a new role, and viewing their future in a new light. As a participant who had been working in the fields for nine years articulated, “To be honest, I never thought I would go back to school.” Many students are balancing seasonal farm work and caregiving and had limited experience with online classes.



The tuition-free program brings together early childhood education courses taught in Spanish, English language development classes, technology training, and hands-on experience in child care settings. In designing this program, UCR PGE drew on its existing online early childhood education (ECE) and English language programs to serve farmworkers as a new target population. The program reaches participants across a broad California service area and was designed so they can continue working while preparing for roles as preschool or day care assistants, classroom support staff, or licensed family child care providers, with a goal of meeting a workforce need in regions that are considered “child care deserts.” Many participants live in rural areas with limited job opportunities outside of agriculture, and the attractions of this career pathway include year-round stability, jobs that are less physically demanding, and opportunities to more easily balance work with family responsibilities.

The program is supported by the [California Farmworkers Advancement Program](#), a first-of-its-kind population-specific investment launched by the state’s Employment Development Department (EDD) to support economic mobility for farmworkers and their families. To date, the initiative has applied over \$25 million in governor’s discretionary funds under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to support 20 awardees, including community-based organizations, workforce development boards,

and educational institutions. Jobs for the Future supports FAP operators as the technical assistance and developmental evaluation provider, helping organizations enhance implementation and share strategies with peers across the network. As the only four-year university with a program serving FAP participants, UCR offers a central lesson: High rigor can open up opportunities when it is paired with high support.

UCR began with a goal of enrolling 50 students, which it considered ambitious for a new program. The university conducted digital, bilingual outreach and engaged with statewide partners to promote the FAP. Enrollment quickly surpassed UCR's expectations and was capped at 61 students. "We appeared to tap into something that was really needed," said Kevin Vaughn, dean of UCR PGE.



02. High Rigor

UCR did not lower the bar for FAP participants, most of whom were entering a university learning environment for the first time. Instead, it adapted a rigorous, credential-aligned pathway to meet their needs. To that end, the program, which began in the fall of 2025, adopted a Saturday schedule that includes online instruction in early childhood education from 8 a.m. to noon and English language support from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., with a lunch break in between. Participants complete approximately five hours of homework each week, submit assignments through a digital learning management system (LMS), prepare for interviews, and progress through multiple ECE and English language levels. By the end of the program, which is designed to last a full year, participants are expected to have earned 12 professional credits.

The program also requires participants to apply what they learn in an early-childhood setting: They must complete a 50-day (150 hours) fieldwork experience in a child care center or licensed preschool. Following completion of the required courses and fieldwork hours, students receive individualized support in applying for a California Child Development Associate Teacher Permit, along with college credit and preparation for continued advancement in ECE. They are also eligible for a completion payment of up to \$1,000.

Participants have described the workload as demanding, but they have also spoken about how much the experience has changed their confidence and goals. One participant recalled, “The first day I arrived, I felt lost [but] the teachers guided me.” Another described a longer-term goal: “What I am looking for would be a job in a school, and from there, later on, I would have my own day care.”

The meaning of the program’s rigor becomes clearest when it is seen through one participant’s journey, showcased below. Ana’s experience shows how an opportunity can connect prior community service, new academic skills, and a future that once felt out of reach.



Participant Story

Ana (a pseudonym) was born in Mexico and became a U.S. citizen at a young age. Her husband and family members are farmworkers residing in Imperial, California. Before participating in the UCR FAP, she volunteered at the local immigration center to support farmworkers and their children. Volunteering inspired her to work with toddlers, but she did not have the resources to attend school to receive professional certification in this field. Ana did not believe that she could have a career or a business of her own at the age of 58, but when the FAP opportunity became available, she knew she wanted to enroll. The program has given her the confidence to care for infants and toddlers, speak English, and start her own business. Ana shared that she now feels motivated and excited about her future.

Cohort Snapshot

Fall 2025 enrollment



61 students

Demographics



100% Hispanic/Latine or Latine,
100% female

Academic



Approximately **1 in 4** lacks
a high school diploma

03. High Support

One of UCR's biggest implementation lessons is that giving people access to education must extend beyond just offering classes. Participants need support with technology, university systems, documentation, internship placements, and the competing demands of work and family.

Rather than viewing these barriers as signs that participants were not ready to participate in the FAP, UCR adjusted the program to help address them.



Onboarding and technology support.

UCR shipped laptops with bilingual step-by-step instructions for setup, provided internet hotspots when needed, and offered individualized support to help participants learn to use email, Zoom, and the LMS. A Spanish-speaking staff member played a central role in providing bilingual one-on-one coaching, helping to bridge language and technology gaps across the program.



Bilingual and relationship-based advising.

Staff members helped participants navigate the program application requirements, including obtaining immunization records and background checks, creating UCR accounts, and navigating administrative processes that could otherwise delay enrollment or placement. Leadership described the approach as going “the extra mile for all.”



Support throughout the classes.

Instructors monitor participation and LMS activity, reach out to students who are falling behind, and adjust communication and assignment processes when technology or life circumstances interfere. English language instruction is contextualized around ECE vocabulary, interviews, resumes, and classroom communication.



Flexible scheduling and completion pathways.

Weekend classes enable participants to keep their weekday field jobs and care for their own children. When participants encounter barriers, staff members extend timelines and implement individualized solutions rather than treating a missed milestone as the end of program participation.



Individualized fieldwork-experience placement support.

Placements require attention to transportation, individual scheduling constraints, seasonal farmwork demands, distance, and partner-site readiness.

This combination of intentional supports is leading toward a high course completion and retention rate, in spite of the demands of the program and the multiple barriers faced by many of the participants. Ten months into the one-year program, 47 students remain enrolled.

Addressing System Constraints

While UCR has had overwhelming success in terms of FAP enrollment, retention, and student success in ECE and English courses, the implementation experience has also come with challenges requiring creative solutions. The following issues, while specific to this program, also reflect common hurdles faced by other FAP awardees and workforce programs more broadly:

Securing employer partnerships for fieldwork experience placements.

UCR's program reaches students across California—which means that staff members must identify local ECE providers to serve as hosts for the required in-person fieldwork in areas where UCR PGE lacks existing partnerships. The process of securing formal memorandums of understanding with new partners has proved to be time-consuming, resulting in delays in being able to offer field placements for some students. Program leaders have extended the completion deadline for participants (from September to December 2026), recognizing that many students will be unable to complete the required 50 days during the busy agricultural harvest season, and they have continued pursuing new partnerships.

Navigating the technical bureaucracies inherent in large systems.

UCR PGE staff have gone above and beyond to help their system become more learner-centered. One example repeatedly cited by leaders and staff members was the challenge that their students, many of whom lacked basic computer literacy at the start of the program, faced in obtaining a university ID and email account. As one administrator explained, “It’s not straightforward. It’s hard even for people who are tech savvy and speak English as their primary language.”

Sustaining high-touch practices with a small team.

The members of the UCR PGE team supporting the FAP are routinely stretched beyond their job descriptions, stepping in to provide translation assistance and IT support, developing creative solutions to support students who have missed classes, or providing referrals for those facing housing insecurity. Replicating the success of the initial cohort will require sustained or increased staffing, including expanding the number of bilingual staff members.

04. Conclusion

UCR's experience shows that rigorous training and intensive support can work together. Participants have completed demanding coursework, learned to use unfamiliar technology, practiced professional English, and entered early childhood education settings while also managing work and family responsibilities. The support helped them stay engaged long enough to benefit from the rigorous program.

UCR's innovative program offers the following lessons for other workforce and education leaders interested in developing strategies for farmworker economic advancement:



Pair high expectations with practical access strategies.

Participants do not need a less-rigorous pathway; they need the tools and conditions that make completing a rigorous pathway possible. Field leaders should treat bilingual instruction, technology support, and other wraparound services as part of program design when building pathways for farmworker communities.



Make learner-centered navigation part of the infrastructure.

Many barriers that appear to be individual-readiness issues are actually system design issues. As colleges and workforce training providers aim to serve more nontraditional learners, such as working adults and those with limited formal education, their success will depend on the roles of proactive navigators and advocates—as well as broader institutional willingness to critically examine and redesign internal processes.



Define success by the quality and durability of the opportunity.

An in-demand, early-childhood pathway can offer an alternative to farmwork that supports the needs and aspirations of many women in California's rural communities, including professional advancement, greater economic stability, and the potential to eventually own a child care business. For UCR, as well as for other leaders of FAP-funded initiatives, the program's ultimate impact will depend on post-completion support to help participants move into quality jobs that validate their intensive efforts.



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