



Marisol Gutierrez (*right*) interviews a migrant laborer as part of UCSD's undergraduate research program in Mexico. (*Photograph courtesy of Wayne A. Cornelius*)

## Crossing Boundaries

### San Diego program illustrates the growing use of undergraduate researchers

By ERIC WILLS

Rob Oliphant sat in the home of a migrant family in Tlacuitapa, Mexico, and enjoyed his first-ever bowl of menudo, a soup made from the lining of a cow's stomach. For a brief time that day in January, the senior at the University of California at San Diego traded stories and became a part of the town's annual fiesta, which honors its patron saint and welcomes home migrants returning from the United States.

When he finished his soup, it was time to work.

Mr. Oliphant was one of 22 San Diego undergraduates who interviewed more than 600 returning and potential migrants in the states of Jalisco and Zacatecas to determine whether U.S. immigration policies were affecting their decisions to cross the border. The students conducted the two-week survey as part of a yearlong project, the Mexican Migration Field Research and Training Program, that will help earn them minors in international-migration studies. They will publish their findings in a book.

"I've never listened so much in my life," says Mr. Oliphant. "This is the only time in my undergraduate career that I've been able to contribute to the understanding of a subject instead of having a subject taught to me."

Offered for the first time this past fall, San Diego's Mexican migration program illustrates a recent trend in research, says Sandra R. Gregerman, director of the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Large research-oriented universities, she says, are encouraging their undergraduates to conduct research that is normally

the focus of graduate programs. They are making such opportunities available to freshmen and sophomores -- not just upperclassmen (the San Diego program is open to sophomores but not freshmen). Finally, universities are introducing undergraduate research, more common in the sciences, into the humanities. Administrators hope to prepare students better for graduate study and to foster closer interaction between them and faculty members. Right now, says Ms. Gregerman, undergraduate research "is the buzzword in academic circles."

Wayne A. Cornelius, director of San Diego's Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, was skeptical at first that undergraduates would be capable of graduate-level fieldwork. In the end, he decided his students could benefit from the research, and could handle the demands if properly trained. Moreover, many of his students were themselves immigrants or the children of immigrants. "They certainly had the motivation and the language skills," says Mr. Cornelius.

In the fall, students in the program learned how to draft a survey, formulate and structure the questions -- which they whittled down to 143 from a list of more than 400 -- and use proper interviewing techniques. They also studied the history and culture of the towns they would canvas.

Then they hit the ground. Anjanette Urdanivia, a senior, interviewed managers and employees at a shoe factory, the only company in one of the towns, and explored rumors of low wages, long hours, and abuse there. Marisol Gutierrez, also a senior, paid particular attention to political activity among migrants both in Mexico and the United States. She interviewed a number of *braceros*, seasonal farmworkers whom U.S. authorities first allowed to cross the border in the 1940s. "These men have lived their whole lives migrating back and forth," says Ms. Gutierrez, whose father was a migrant.

Students also heard stories of migrants stowed away in car trunks and between mattresses to elude border patrols, of failed crossings ending in death, of those who made it across and have not returned. "There is no more effective way to get a student to understand the forces that drive people to abandon their hometowns for the United States," says Mr. Cornelius, "than getting them into the field."

After returning, Mr. Cornelius divided students into teams responsible for each of the book's 11 chapters. So far, the research points to several conclusions: Increased border enforcement is not deterring migrants from entering the United States, and migrants are willing to take greater risks and pay smugglers more money to gain entry. Only a decrease in American jobs is likely to deter migrants from crossing the border, the research suggests.

Other topics of investigation include migrants' use of social services in the United States, duration and type of stay, and migration by women. Many of the students may continue to contribute to this body of knowledge, including Mr. Oliphant. He plans to return to Mexico for further research, and he already has a location in mind: Hidalgo, the hometown of almost all the Mexican employees at the Claim Jumper, a prospector-themed restaurant near San Diego where Mr. Oliphant worked as a busboy.

"I want to continue in the field," he says.