New Center for Study of Immigrant Integration Announced

News delivered during a recent conference that drew 350 — including Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

By Pamela J. Johnson
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USC College and the USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development (SPPD) have created a new center addressing the urgent need for knowledge about the successful integration of immigrants.

College Dean Howard Gillman and SPPD Dean Jack Knott made the announcement during a recent conference, “Immigrant Integration and the American Future: Lessons from and for California.”

Gillman said of the new Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration: “This effort was driven by USC’s long-standing commitment to promote research and scholarship on important urban questions, and the desire to find a particular issue that would be of great significance to L.A., to the nation, and to the world.”

Today, one in eight United States residents is an immigrant. In Los Angeles County alone, one-third of residents are foreign-born, nearly half the workforce is immigrant, and two-thirds of those under 18 are children of immigrants — 90 percent of them U.S.-born.

The center aims to facilitate civic dialogue about the intersecting issues of immigrant settlement, economic mobility, social cohesion and social equity.

“The importance of immigrant integration cuts across almost every area of
scholarship under the SPPD umbrella,” Knott said. “It’s our job to begin to frame a new narrative to show that immigrants and established residents share an interdependent future.”

Rather than focusing only on new arrivals, the center will promote research and dialogue concerning long-term issues of immigrant settlement, generational succession, incorporation and integration.

Manuel Pastor, professor of geography and of American studies and ethnicity in the College, and Dowell Myers, professor of urban planning and demography in SPPD and sociology in the College, will act as co-directors.

The new center builds on the ongoing USC Provost Initiative on Immigration and Integration — a program launched two years ago supporting research about the challenges, opportunities, benefits and costs associated with integrating immigrant communities into all aspects of social life.

The provostial initiative, as well as the College and SPPD, sponsored the conference, held at the Davidson Executive Conference Center at USC.

The April 22 conference drew about 350 academics, policy makers and community leaders.

The USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, and its director Pastor; and the USC Population Dynamics Research Group, and its director Myers organized the event.

During the conference, Gillman thanked Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, professor of sociology, who chaired a university-wide faculty committee executing the initiative. He also thanked Pastor, who oversaw the College’s efforts.

Knott also acknowledged Myers, who oversaw SPPD’s initiative efforts.

“Dowell and Manuel represent the key partnership that allowed us to move this initiative to the next level,” Knott said. “They deserve an enormous amount of credit.”

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa was among those who spoke at the conference.

“Looking around the room, it’s not hyperbolic to say this is a distinguished audience here,” Villaraigosa said.

Some in attendance included Gara LaMarche, president and chief executive officer of the Atlantic Philanthropies, who gave the keynote speech; Stewart Kwoh, founding president and executive director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California; Marqueece Harris-Dawson, executive director of Community Coalition; and Antonia Hernández, president and chief executive officer of the California Community Foundation.

“These are some of the most important people who have been on the front lines of the issue of immigration for many, many years,” Villaraigosa said.

“It’s good to see you all.”
Villaraigosa emphasized the importance of “standing up for the idea that the contribution of immigrants far outweighs whatever negative consequences come with embracing so many new people.”

“When you look at the L.A. economy as an example,” he said, “what is clear is that the contributions are mighty. If there weren’t an immigrant workforce we wouldn’t be the lead manufacturer in the United States. Period. Ask the Chamber of Commerce. We wouldn’t be the center of apparel in the United States. And the list goes on and on.”

Instead of building “$50 billion walls,” Villaraigosa said, “what about $50 billion for education? What about $50 billion to teach people English? Or $50 billion to give them the skills to become more productive? That would be a better investment, a wiser investment, and one to benefit everyone.”

During one of several panel discussions, Maria Elena Durazo expanded on Villaraigosa’s point.

“What I think we need to face in this country is the hard work that immigrants are already integrated in doing,” said Durazo, executive secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO. “There’s no lack of integration of immigrants in the workforce. They are absolutely essential and integrated into the workforce.”

But immigrants are not “integrated” with the same rights as all workers, she said, noting that 34 percent of immigrants in Los Angeles County in the past decade were from Mexico. Over the years, there has been an increase in immigrants from China, the Philippines and India, to name a few countries.

“They’re not integrated in the way that we respect the hard work that they’re doing,” Durazo said. “Not just Latinos, but many, many nationalities.”

At the conference, several people cited a recent editorial Pastor and Myers wrote for the Los Angeles Times. In it, they urge the current presidential candidates to keep the issue of immigration reform alive.

Over the past several months, the two have talked to local business, labor community and philanthropic leaders about the issue. The messages have been consistent.

“The first is the hope that we can change the narrative: Immigrants should not be viewed as a problem to be solved but as an asset to our regional future,” Pastor and Myers wrote. “New research must be developed, then shared and debated, if we are to build a broader understanding of our interwoven destinies.”