Integrating L.A.: The Social and Economic Factors in the Integration of Mexican Immigrants in Los Angeles

On November 10th, Rafael Alarcón, Research Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), shared preliminary findings from a study entitled “The Social and Economic Integration of Mexican Immigrants in Los Angeles.” This research by Alarcón, Luis Escala Rabadán, and Olga Odgers included socio-demographic analysis, ethnographic analysis of three Mexican origin populations from Zacatecas, Oaxaca and Veracruz who settled at different times and under diverse circumstances, and an analysis of policy from the City of Los Angeles as it has facilitated and/or restricted integration.

The study builds on the work of two scholars. First, Samuel Huntington who argues that Mexicans are not and do not wish to be integrated into U.S. society. Second, Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, one of the first to research Mexican-immigrant integration in the United States in the late 1920s, and who is often overlooked, as his work is in Spanish. The research team tried to replicate Gamio’s methodology.

The team has gathered data from 90 interviews, one-third each from immigrants from Zacatecas, Veracruz and Oaxaca. The analysis is showing that Zacatacas is the traditional sending region that has historically sent more people than any other Mexican state. In fact, there are more Zacatecanos living in the United States than there are currently living in Zacatecas. Furthermore, because of its central location and relative proximity to the border, it was easy to travel to El Paso, TX. These immigrants have saturated certain employment options, like gardening. Zacatecanos arrived first, followed by Oaxacan immigrants (many of whom are Zapotec Indians), followed by newcomers from Veracruz.

Alarcón argues in this study that the year of arrival has important consequences. The Zacatecanos wave was the earliest—in the mid to late 1970s— and benefited from arriving before IRCA (1986). Oaxacans and Veracruzanos who arrived in early to mid 1980s, did not. Pre- IRCA arrival enabled immigrants to become legal residents, acquire more benefits, and improve their condition. Alarcon and his colleagues found that Zacatecanos have moved up the employment ladder from, say, factory workers to entrepreneurs. However, Oaxacans and Veracruzanos had more difficulty changing their legal status, conditions only made worse in the 1990s with the militarization of the border and stricter immigration laws.

Immigrants’ reasons for staying the U.S have also changed. Alarcon noted that early on in the study, they saw immigrants’ shift from fearing “La Migra” (Border Patrol) to fearing for their own safety. The recently heightened violence in Mexico due to the drug wars is producing fear among immigrants in the U.S., many of whom are staying in the U.S. to have peace of mind and security. As a result, interviewees were hesitant to participate for fear that the information they provided, particularly about income and family, would result in kidnappings or other violent acts.

The research team has also seen a shift in what Mexican immigrants consider the “American Dream.” Formerly, immigrants dreamed of coming to the U.S., earning money, returning to Mexico, and buying a house or starting a business. Now, the Dream is to make it in the U.S. form a family and establish roots in the U.S. This new dream, although possibly the result of the surge of violence in Mexico, is serving as a vehicle for integration.

About 50 people attended this event from USC and the broader Los Angeles community.