

Which Way, America?: Reframing, Regrouping and Realigning for Immigrant Integration | April 26, 2011 | Event Summary

In what felt like a gasp of fresh air, over 300 convened at USC earlier this month to reframe, regroup, and realign for immigrant integration. Immigration reform came to a stunning halt last Spring, and in the wake of it, the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration and numerous partners – especially the James Irvine Foundation – brought together the Los Angeles community to identify the renewed path ahead.

Students, advocates, organizers, community members, activists, business people, researchers, and policymakers gathered on April 6, 2011 at USC for “Which Way, America? Reframing, Regrouping, and Realigning for Immigrant Integration.” A central focus of the day was how the challenge of immigration policy is moving down the geographic scale: increasingly, the battles about integrating or restricting immigrants are occurring at the state, regional, and local levels – in places like Los Angeles.

To address the way forward, the conference hosted over 50 speakers, including USC Provost Elizabeth Garrett; US Citizen and Immigration Services Director, Ali Mayorkas; and LA City Mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa. But the interactive nature of the conference also meant that the voices of attendees were amplified and equally important.

Attendees participated in six breakout sessions on the topics of naturalization and citizenship, business, politics, education and workforce, alliances and enforcement. Panelists included Utah business leader, David Mathis; National Immigration Forum’s Ali Noorani; and UCLA Labor Center director, Kent Wong; among many others. Breakout session attendees and panelists identified pressing current issues, key players, and strategies to move forward – for example, working with businesses that give back to the community.

A key issue that always bubbles-up is creating strong alliances between immigrants and non-immigrants, Latinos and African-Americans. In South L.A., the Community Coalition is doing this work. Said Executive Director Marqueece Harris_Dawson, “real life at the grassroots offers, I think, much more opportunity for cooperation than conversation [than] the grass tops does. So when a school is bad in South LA, it’s not just bad for black kids, and it’s not just bad for Latino kids, it’s not just bad for documented kids and bad for undocumented kids, it’s bad for everybody.” CoCo works for something good for both.

Other broad themes that emerged from these sessions and throughout the day included reframing the narrative to ‘move the middle,’ realigning behind the California DREAM Act to lead the country, and building new and stronger alliances across sectors. An unusual take-away, participants were encouraged to “date wildly” – that is, to be sure to not only meet new people across sectors but to know them.

The National Domestic Worker’s Alliance builds strong alliances for immigrant integration between home workers and upper- and middle-class employers. Director Ai-

Jen Poo spoke of the importance of supporting domestic workers in terms of “respecting the work that makes all other work possible.” NDWA puts legs to the work of USC academics Dowell Myers, who in his book *Immigrants and Boomers* identifies the importance of building interdependence across generations, as well as across race, class, immigration status.

Another group in attendance and central to the movement: students leaders in the movement to pass the DREAM Act in California and the country, some of whom are “undocumented and unafraid.” Youth leader David Cho of UCLA spoke in the education and workforce panel, and called for businesses and organization to provide scholarships and financial aid for DREAMers who are unable to secure funding to stay in college with rising tuition costs.

Cho has the Mayor’s support: Villaraigosa in his closing stated definitively, “I want you to know that I will never ever back down from this issue.” And that’s just the mindset we need. Dr. Robert Ross of the California Endowment reminded advocates that “we think we’re in a debate, they think we’re in a fight,” in terms of the political battles for immigration reform. Civil discourse is needed and important, but speakers urged attendees to remember the political context in which the movement stands.

April’s conference was CSII’s second, since established at the first conference in 2008. Manuel Pastor continues as director, while Ange-Marie Hancock has become associate director, in place of former co-director and co-founder, Dowell Myers – all are USC professors. CSII combines data analysis, academic scholarship, and civic engagement to support improved economic mobility for, enhanced civic participation by, and receiving society openness to immigrants.

Ross challenged us to not “settle for what’s happening in Arizona and in Washington and in Sacramento,” but to remember “what this country is really about ... and why our parents and grandparents and great grandparents felt that this was a special place, even though they came from a point of hopelessness and poverty and desperation.”

In all, attendees strategized ways to move the larger national message from one of fear to one of inspiration, inclusion, and a brighter future that benefits all members of society, young and old, immigrants and non-immigrants alike.