

Reflections from “Immigrant Youth: Change for a demographic,” at The Global American South conference, April 21, 2012

The annual Global American South conference is dedicated to understanding the increasingly global connections of our region. At the 2012 conference (held April 21, 2012), the Latino Migration Project organized a panel on migration with a focus on youth. Specifically, we wanted to bring youth together to think about their role in facilitating 1) the economic and social integration of immigrants and their families into communities in North Carolina and 2) involvement of youth in policy debates around immigration issues at local, state, and national levels. In other words, we wanted to engage all participants in a conversation about how they are working to improve the lives of immigrants in communities in North Carolina through day to day service, as well as through engagement in public policy.

Why are the voices of immigrant youth important? Youth are having an impact not just locally but nationally, particularly with respect to engagement in national policy debates around immigration reform, access to higher education, and the fight against restrictive state legislation. The proliferation of grassroots youth groups reflects a number of different factors that include:

- 1) The urgency of economic and educational needs in immigrant communities in new destinations states like North Carolina.
- 2) The perception that the state’s more established immigrant advocacy and service organizations do not have the capacity to effectively lobby for policy change.
- 3) The growth of second and third generation immigrant youth populations in the state, the maturation and the strengthening of these voices. This goes along with the transition of the state population from an immigrant population to a native born population consisting of the children and grandchildren of immigrants; or to put it another way, the growth of a population of North Carolinians with diverse backgrounds.

When we looked at the work that youth were doing with immigrant communities, we found a number of different important contributions in the following areas: Language acquisition, Policy advocacy, cultural awareness, financial literacy, improving college access, mentoring students, civic education around rights and responsibilities, direct medical services through free clinics, and professional development. These efforts result in thousands of hours of public service with newcomers throughout the state. We found, also, a concentration of organizations in urban areas like the triangle and Charlotte area, revealing under resourced areas of the state.

In preparation for this event, we connected with youth in more than fifty organizations statewide, in institutions of higher education that include community colleges and universities; in high schools; as part of non-profit organizations with national, state and local ties; and as grassroots organizations in early stages of development. At UNC-Chapel Hill alone, we have more than 15 organizations that work with immigrant and refugees. We reached out to youth

and asked what sort of event they would like to have, to which they responded with specific topics, summarized below:

- 1) The opportunity to meet others doing similar work and learn about what other youth and immigrant organizations are doing statewide;
- 2) The opportunity to have a dialogue about important issues like access to higher education and immigration reform;
- 3) Information about the history of past youth movements in the United States.

With these issues in mind, we organized a networking lunch and a two hour afternoon session that included short presentations by Sarah McNamara, Doctoral Student of History at UNC Chapel Hill and member of the Southern Oral History Program research team, who spoke about the importance of documenting the work of immigrant youth in North Carolina; Zaragosa Vargas, Kenan Distinguished Professor of History at UNC Chapel Hill, who spoke about Latino history and US Social Movements, and Hannah Gill, author of *The Latino Migration Experience in North Carolina: New Roots in the Old North State*. Following the presentations, moderator Josmell J. Pérez, Coordinator of Multicultural Programs at the Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs, facilitated group discussions around the following questions:

- What are the biggest challenges you face in your organization's work?
- How do you communicate across communities or organizations about your work?
- How can we better connect to each other?
- What are your organization's goals?
- What is the power of the documenting your own voices?
- How do we move forward from this event?

The session was attended by 65 people.

Participants' recommendations for follow up included organizing additional events to enable youth, students and others to connect.

To see full video coverage of the event, visit <http://vimeo.com/41925106>

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