

A Dream Deferred?: Building Activists for Educational Justice, Access, and Equity

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This collaboratively written essay explores and advocates for the rich potential of community–university educational-activist partnerships for praxis-oriented learning that enrich the lives of all by unleashing the collective power of students, teachers, and community members. Offering four perspectives from such a collaboration in Minnesota, a place that has been a magnet for national and regional anti-immigrant activity, we reflect on the false notion of a town-gown divide, the emotional, political, and deeply personal investments we have in making these collaborations successful, and the critically important and imperative nature of community-based work for shaping a more humane and just future.

Chicanismo simply embodies an ancient truth: that a person is never closer to his/her true self as when he/she is close to his/her community. Chicanismo draws its faith and strength from two main sources: from the just struggle of our people and from an objective analysis of our community's strategic needs. We recognize that without a strategic use of education, an education that places value on what we value, we will not realize our destiny. Chicanos recognize the central importance of institutions of higher learning to modern progress, in this case, to the development of our community. But we go further: we believe that higher education must contribute to the formation of a complete person who truly

values life and freedom. . . . To that end, we pledge our efforts and take as our credo what Jose Vasconcelos once said at a time of crisis and hope: "At this moment we do not come to work for the university, but to demand that the university work for our people."

—from El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education (1969)

Introduction: From the Outside-In and the Inside-Out

Taking as its departure an ongoing collaboration between the Department of Chicano Studies at the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Immigrant Freedom Network (MIFN) to build a multi-ethnic movement that addresses educational access and equity for Latina/o youth and recent immigrants, this essay presents one example of how Chicana/o faculty and students bridge the town-gown divide on behalf of the community, as espoused in *El Plan de Santa Barbara*. In sharing the viewpoints and experiences of students, faculty, and community organizers, we hope to provide one model of collaboration for readers of *Reflections*, but it is important to note that we are less invested in showing the connections to or benefits from this within a service-learning framework than we are in tracing the genealogy of civic engagement that comes from Chicano Studies, which is based on a similar but distinct set of political investments in educational reform. To this end, the important question posed by the editors—"How can we work with immigrant communities in a way that meets their needs and enhances our scholarship without interrupting their sense of communal identity?"—needs to be problematized in its assumption of difference between "we" and "immigrant communities."

This first section provides historical context for this discussion. The second section frames the legacy of educational exclusion within the context of labor segregation, particularly as experienced by new immigrants, and argues that systemic change is still necessary. In this



section, the Executive Director of an advocacy group shares with us his personal motivations and the emotional basis for his work and asks us to think about the lessons we convey when we accept a status quo that underdevelops our youth and limits their opportunities. The third and fourth sections of this essay trace the personal trajectories of two students-turned MIFN staff members, highlighting how the personal is political and the role Chicano Studies and service-learning courses played in empowering them to find their passions and later lead different social justice organizing projects within the organization. Finally, we conclude with some reflections on the nation's demographic changes and ask university-community collaborations to strategically engage with this historic change.

Aprender es luchar, luchar es aprender: Community Engagement as an Integral Component of Chicano Studies

Almost 40 years following the authorship of *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, Chicana/o Studies has been firmly established as an academic discipline in hundreds of colleges and universities across the country.² As the epigraph makes clear, the establishment of Chicano Studies was a grassroots intervention into the exclusionary practices of an educational system that was either hostile or willfully blind to the educational needs of Chicanos and Latinos.

The students and few faculty and administrators who had gained entry into the echelons of the university professoriate in the 1960s made a strategic decision to link K-16 educational empowerment to the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Despite the use of often radical rhetoric that utilized strategies including protests, sit-ins, and cries of "open it up, or shut it down," the ultimate goal was to expand educational access and make education more relevant.³ These early struggles were premised not only on the belief that educational equity was a fundamental civil right, but that the public had the right to hold leaders of educational institutions accountable. Moreover, explicit



in manifestos like *El Plan* were the needs of a culturally relevant curriculum and the *obligation* of students to utilize their education to empower their community.

Under pressure from Chicana/o students inspired by the twin forces of the national movement to establish Chicano Studies and the local successes of African American and American Indian students who had successfully advocated for ethnic studies departments, the first department of Chicano Studies in the Midwest was established at University of Minnesota in 1972. As with other departments founded in this period, the underlying conceptual framework and curriculum were informed by *El Plan* and included a strong component of community engagement and research. Despite this highly successful intervention for amending institutional neglect, the ongoing lack of access and educational inequity at all levels remain fundamental challenges for the Chicano-Latino community in the twenty-first century. The graduation rate for Latinos remains less than 50% nationally as Latinos consistently lead the nation in high school drop-out rates.⁴ In Minnesota, a state that prides itself in being amongst the national leaders in educational achievement, the public school graduation rate for Latinos is an abysmal 41%.⁵

Like many of its sister departments around the nation, over the years Chicano Studies at the U of M has included opportunities for community collaboration on research projects, the development of partnerships with farm worker organizations that included research, political action, and organizational support. Until service-learning courses were formally offered by the department in the 1990s, much of this work was ad hoc and depended on the politics, interests, and relationships of individual faculty and students. Though service-learning has been supported and advocated on campus for many years, there has also been a healthy skepticism of "traditional" service-learning models that relied too much on the "experiential model" of learning that privileged the student's learning experience over community need. The long and vexed history



of university exploitation of minority communities under the aegis of research has made many ethnic communities justifiably wary of university sponsored research or service-learning projects because even under models that are designed to be mutually beneficial, the assumption of a power or knowledge differential has often viewed communities through a lens of deficiency and favored students, presumably outsiders who could broaden their world view from first-hand experience with “difference,” be it class or racial. Such assumptions, unwittingly or not, often contributed to a missionary model of service-learning, with all its attendant colonialist baggage.

In 2004 the Department of Chicano Studies made a strategic decision to focus its service-learning courses on Latino educational achievement in the Twin Cities. To achieve this we identified four community partners, two schools, a Latino after school program, and a farm worker organization. As the fastest growing population in Minnesota, new Latina/o arrivals are a mix of internal migrants and foreign-born with and without official status. Distinctions between documented and undocumented make no sense as these youth are an integral part of the workforce of the future, their civic identities have been forged here, and an educated populace benefits all.

This focus on educational advancement was well-received by university students and our community allies and supporters. However, because of the severe under-representation of Latino students at the university, we also needed to develop and support off-campus engagement opportunities for students who wished to redefine and expand the traditional service-learning experience. What follows in the remainder of this essay is an explanation of our particular context and a strategy that developed from our collaboration that did just this by yoking our existing service-learning project with a local movement aimed at removing institutional barriers in a manner that required a unique level of commitment, creativity, and responsibility by student leaders involved in the effort. In many respects, these students acted on another



non-hegemonic principle expressed in *El Plan*, which states in its introduction that:

For the Movement, political action essentially means influencing the decision-making process of those institutions which affect Chicanos, the university, community organizations, and non-community institutions. Political action encompasses the elements which function in a progression: political consciousness, political mobilization, and tactics.

Politicizing the Personal

Louis Mendoza, Associate Professor of Chicano Studies

As a first-generation college student from a working class barrio of Houston, I am also a product of my Catholic upbringing and education; despite the fact that my educational journey has included moving away from this belief system and the region of my childhood, these values are not so far removed from the values that undergird service-learning: social awareness, social responsibility, the value of reflection, and the virtues of magnanimity and reciprocity.⁶ And yet, I have also found that advocating for systemic change requires social change and risk. Having relocated to Minnesota from Texas in 2004, I found it necessary to think about migration and immigration in new ways. Immigration and its consequences, the ensuing friction, fears, and fights, is not to be escaped in states like Minnesota or other “new destinations” of Latino migration. My position as Department Chair carried unique expectations to be a resource for the public’s awareness of this “emerging” population. This was true in spite of the fact that a Chicano-Latino presence in Minnesota is a century-long phenomenon, not something new at all.

Not insignificantly, the mainstream community’s concerns were heightened by census reports announcing the emergence of Latinos



as the nation's largest ethnic minority—a trend that will result in Latinos comprising a full 25% of the population by mid-century. Two phenomena fanned the fires of the national debate following the December 2005 passage of H.R. 4437, the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, by the US House of Representatives. This controversial bill raised the stakes of the debate by requiring the construction of a border fence, modified the status of “unlawful presence” to a felony, and, among other harsh provisions, authorized state and local law enforcement agencies to enforce federal immigration laws.

In light of these developments, one of the strategies we crafted to respond to the imperative of quality education for all students, including immigrants, was to create internships, develop grant-funded partnerships, and offer directed studies courses that would enable students to receive course credit for their community engagement and service-learning efforts. And it was in this complementary effort to our educational empowerment agenda that we forged a strong partnership with the MIFN. Students' educational development and civic consciousness were enhanced in their roles as coaches in the MN Dream Act movement and through the organizing skills they learned at the Network, where several students became temporary or permanent staff members of this small but powerful organization.

Our strategic commitment to work on immigrant rights was not a mere accommodation of student interests or a way for them to earn easy course credit. Rather, community-based work enables students to more fully understand the notion of “praxis”; that is, it gives them an opportunity to test the relationships between theory and practice in a real-world setting. Being in a community-based setting presents a different set of challenges because success is defined in ways outside of the academic criteria by which we usually measure learning. Here students are accountable for their actions, not just their thinking, and



success is measured beyond the completion of an assignment and their own individual well-being. Their actions are part of something larger than themselves, and so success or failure at their work is more complex. They also learn that change is hard work and requires a different degree of commitment as the standards we set for involvement are higher than most service-learning requirements at the university.

Partnering with undergraduates and community-based organizations also benefits faculty. For one, it breaks us out of the isolation of the ivory tower and obliges us to ponder and act upon the relevance of our own work as teachers and scholars; working closely on community-based projects offers faculty an opportunity to stay true to our intellectual and our historical roots. Also, these projects productively set the stage for a mutually beneficial learning experience involving the community organization, student, and instructor where the flow of knowledge comes from the community into the university and positively impacts the lens through which we each see our world.

I am constantly reminded that these students are what Chicana/o Studies is all about—they are not studying or working in some abstract community; they are vital members of the very same community, they are the bridge between two worlds. For our students the “division” between the university and the community is a false one—they come from these communities—and the division between citizen and non-citizen is also seen as false when the benefit is shared by all. To Latina/o students, faculty, and staff, and an increasingly large number of non-Latina/o students, undocumented immigrants aren't just statistics or names in the news, they're family, friends, neighbors, or former classmates. In a globalized economy, our own well-being is tied to the well-being of others. Students who wish to make their education relevant are a dynamic example of emerging leadership and the rich potential of theory put into practice. Students who are advocates in grassroots campaigns are creating history, not only studying it.



While the issue of higher education for immigrant and Latino youth is a concern that is seen as marginal for those who fail to see how this issue affects them, for a great portion of the mainstream, supporting and advocating for educational access initiatives is a re-affirmation of the fundamental humanistic principles of justice and fairness. Working on the MN Dream Act presents an opportunity to learn about alliance building. In Minnesota, and places where the population is fast-growing but still relatively small, we know that a campaign like this cannot be framed as “us” versus “them.” While there are a great many people who do not see access to education as a fundamental human right for all students, there are also a great many people who understand that we are part of one large community and that our destinies are intertwined.

Politically and economically, the future of this country depends on having an educated workforce. The failure to educate all young people today will have drastic consequences for this country in the future. Working with MIFN, with students, and allied communities is tied to one of the founding tenets of Chicano Studies, to take every opportunity to widen the doors leading to the university. What follows are perspectives from organizers at MIFN, whose staff includes former students and employees from the department who embody the false notion that a town-gown divide necessarily exists—in this case, we are the community, the community is us.

Nuestra lucha, el Inicio y Activismo como cimientos del Movimiento

Mariano Espinoza, Executive Director of the MIFN

While mobilizing suited one important aspect of the Civil Rights movement—gathering and deploying large numbers of persons towards a common—mobilizing did not ensure lasting, broad or continual change. Ella Baker and Septima Clark focused on organizing and educating



persons to leave local communities empowered, and thereafter, open to ongoing evolution after outside civil rights workers left. Baker and Clark emphasized the reality that real change for African Americans (for racial justice in the United States) would not result instantly from successful (read: large) marches, rallies or demonstrations. Through their work they asserted that change would result from ongoing racial uplift and social responsibility practices, deriving from new visions, new abilities, and new structures originating in and nurtured by local people who are organized and educated for change and who themselves become organizers and educators for change. (1)

Voy en camino a una reunión con las familias de Worthington, así como en el pasado, el futuro lo estamos construyendo con nuestras acciones en el presente. Las comunidades fuera del área metropolitana usualmente son aisladas y marginalizadas no solo por las distancias, pero los recursos a los inmigrantes. Muchas organizaciones sin fines de lucro se forman en las zonas urbanas y bastantes son las personas que quieren ayudar en las zonas metropolitanas pero pocas son las organizaciones e individuos que reconocen y están dispuestos a salir de sus zonas cómodas para trabajar con las comunidades rurales. Me siento cansado y esta obscuro, al igual que en el pasado ahora hay que hacer sacrificios personales, dejamos a nuestras familias, seres queridos y amigos. El Organizar, construir y fundar un movimiento no es fácil, requiere de largas horas de trabajo, noches sin dormir y días sin comer.

Como Nacimos

Nosotros la Red de los Inmigrantes somos una organización que nacimos de la gente, En el año 2003 salimos a la calle para denunciar las injusticias, explotación y opresión en contra de los inmigrantes, Inspirados por el espíritu del movimiento de los derechos civiles miles de personas participaron en acciones, rallies, marchas conferencias y conferencias prensa para resucitar y poner de regreso el tema de una reforma inmigratoria en la agenda política nacional.



De Minnesota participaron cerca de 90 personas, de Worthington fueron dos trabajadores miembros del sindicato ufcw, Jesús y Raymundo, ellos son miembros de la unión de trabajadores que representan a los obreros de la Swift una de las empacadoras de carne que existen en esta área del estado.

Jesús y Raymundo son dos inmigrantes de México que ha vivido en la comunidad por más 20 años, Jesús es ahora el vicepresidente de la Unión y Raymundo trabaja ahora como un organizador a nivel nacional para el mismo sindicato en Carolina del Norte.

En el Freedom Ride hubo muchas memorias y acciones que realizamos, fue un momento que se quedo marcado en nuestras vidas, nunca me imaginaba que este movimiento iba hacer tan grande, nunca pensé que miles de personas iban a estar participar a lo largo y ancho del país para apoyara y unirse en solidaridad a nosotros los inmigrantes.

La caravana de los trabajadores inmigrantes es un movimiento que nació para pelear, luchar y para cambiar las leyes racistas y opresivas que existen en este país, que nos están afectando oprimiendo y opresando cada uno de los días en que vivimos. Estamos luchando por una reforma migratoria y leyes humanas y dignas.

Nuestra Escuela es Nuestra Vida

Para luchar hay que conocer nuestra historia, necesitamos saber no solo de donde venimos, Si no Pero porque venimos? y Como somos desplazados de nuestras comunidades de Origen. A través de nuestras historias personales vamos adquiriendo y construyendo nuestro conocimiento para después conectarlo a un movimiento.

Durante el transcurso de estas dos semanas estuvimos escuchando y aprendiendo de nuestras propias experiencias, el porque venimos a este país, aprendimos como mexicano, guatemaltecos, somalí y asiáticos fuimos desplazados de nuestros países para buscar un futuro mejor.



Fue muy bonito aprender de otras culturas, y aun más bonito fue el que nos mezclamos para hacer una unión y una fuerza muy grande. Segundo a segundo, instante a instante nos íbamos haciendo amigos, nos íbamos conociendo mejor, celebrando las riquezas culturas y sabiduría que todos tenemos.

Mi lucha, Mi Experiencia Personal

Las memorias que dejamos en nuestros países, los recuerdos de nuestros hijos son la comida que alimenta el cuerpo para cruzar la frontera y las barreras que se nos oponen al andar, pero entre mas tiempo pasamos aquí, vemos que el sueño Americano se convierte en un mito inalcanzable, irreal y ficticio.

Recuerdo el primer momento, recuerdo mi sueño de darle lo mejor a mi hija. La noche era oscura, el frío del desierto era tan fuerte que rompía mis ropas lentamente y se infiltraba a través de mi cuerpo hasta llegar a mis huesos, mi cuerpo temblaba de frío. Fue ahí, en esos momentos rodeados por los nopales donde me imaginaba como el amor de vida pronto llegaría de México para reunirnos, soñé con los ojos abiertos que Denise seria la niña mas afortunada del mundo, me ilusionaba como ella crecería rodeada de libros e historias en la cama. El hermoso sueño Americano era mi medicina contra el frío y el dolor de huesos. Pero Denise fue mi alimento para levantarme, seguir caminando y recorriendo el trayecto lleno de injusticias y abusos, el sueño que ella iría a la universidad. El sueño de que ella seria una profesionista inyecto mi cuerpo de energía y me levante, mis pies llenos de ampollas empezaron a caminar nuevamente, ahí vencí mi primera lucha, mis pies sangraron pero mi espíritu se levanto para luchar y para darle lo mejor a mi pequeña niña. A Denise la futura astronauta, la gran doctora. Deny mi pequeña... Tu sueño va ser mi sueño...tu futuro mi futuro...tu lucha será mi lucha...



Al final del viaje nos sentimos todos como parte de una familia muy grande donde no veíamos las nacionalidades ni el color de la piel como una diferencia, si no Al contrario nos vimos como seres humanos donde un sistema nos esta utilizando a todos. En este grupo había gente blanca, documentados e indocumentada Al final fuimos una familia.

Al regresar a Minnesota decidimos seguir luchando y organizando para fundar un movimiento y una lucha como nunca se había hecho, teníamos el espíritu muy alto, una energía increíble y maravillosa porque habíamos vivido nuestras experiencias y junto con muchas personas nos estábamos alimentando nuestro espíritu, pero también aprendimos que las injusticias que se viven en otras partes del país abecés son mas grandes que las que estamos viviendo en nuestras casas.

Alimentados por la energía y la pasión nos empezamos a reunir. No teníamos una organización establecida, estructura, no teníamos nada. Lo hicimos como voluntarios. Lo hicimos por todas y todos los inmigrantes de Minnesota y lo hicimos porque teníamos la necesidad, no podíamos bajar los brazos en esta lucha que habíamos empezado. Queríamos una organización que no tuviera ligamientos con otras organizaciones, una organización que fuera de nuestras luchas y de nuestros esfuerzos, independiente y sin ataduras, ahí nacimos como organización.

El Inicio de un Movimiento en Base a Nuestros Principios

Nosotros los inmigrantes somos seres humanos a través de nuestras experiencias personales vamos formando un poder de conocimiento colectivo y unidos creamos un movimiento masivo y educado para crear cambios y construir comunidades saludables y autosuficientes. Lucharemos para remover las barreras racistas institucionales y mentales que nos impiden vernos como hermanos y hermanas, sin importar sexo, nacionalidad o creencias.



Nuestros hijos, los inmigrantes y las minorías somos el pasado, el presente y el futuro, sabemos que este país se construyo en base a la opresión, racismo y esclavitud, A través de nuestras propias experiencias empezaremos el proceso de concientización personal y colectivo para luchar contra las raíces económicas, políticas, culturas y racistas que nos opresan.

Sabemos que podemos movilizar a cientos y miles de personas y también reconocemos que para hacer cambios hay que saber como hacer cambios. La red de los inmigrantes esta comprometida a capacitar, aprender y ofrecer las herramientas y los recursos para ayudar a las personas a desarrollar su potencial humano y de liderazgo. Reconocemos nuestras vidas como historias para lograr procesos de cambio y también tomamos en cuenta los procesos académicos y de investigación para ayudar nuestras causas.

Necesitamos hacer una conexión y establecer lazos de solidaridad y trabajo con las escuelas, universidades, iglesias y grupos comunitarios, para crear un movimiento y una red de Solidaridad.

Aprendemos de nuestras historias para incrementar nuestros conocimientos, nos capacitamos, comprometemos y nos movilizamos para crear una comunidad justa, de igualdad y respeto.

En el 2004 hicimos la primera reunión con legisladores y convocamos una reunión con organizaciones separadamente. Nos reunimos con el Representante Carlos Mariani y la Representante Margaret Andersen Kelliher para proponerles la idea de introducir una propuesta legislativa que le ayudara a los jóvenes inmigrantes ir a la universidad.

Y ahí quedo grabado en mi memoria un recuerdo que jamás olvidare: los legisladores me dijeron que yo estaba loco porque este no era el momento adecuado para introducir una propuesta de ley que le iba a dar acceso a los estudiantes inmigrantes a las universidades públicas del estado. Yo estaba sorprendido porque no sabia que existía un interés



político, no entendía el porque una prioridad para nosotros tenía que hacerse a un lado. Pero lo importante es lo que los estudiantes querían hacer y así se inicio el compromiso de apoyar a los jóvenes inmigrantes en sus esfuerzos para cambiar las leyes del estado. Cuando nos decían que no, nosotros decíamos que si. Cuando nos decían locos, nosotros respondíamos ustedes están mas. Ellos no sabían lo que era no tener papeles, pero nosotros si sabíamos.

También tuvimos otra reunión con Centro Campesino en Owatonna, estábamos concientes de que se necesitaba trabajar con los aliados de las areas rurales, pero nadie mas de la ciudad se presento. A esta reunión llego una persona que no sabíamos quien era, con una personalidad muy fuerte y extravertida. Hablamos acerca de lo que podíamos hacer para empujar por el MN Dream Act y muy rápidamente nos dimos cuenta de que sabíamos como organizar pero no sabíamos nada de como pasar una ley. Y en ese instante esa persona desconocida se levanto de su asiento como un resorte, tomo el marcador, fue hacia el frente del grupo y nos dio una cátedra de cómo se pasan las leyes – esta persona fue Matt Musel. El nos pregunto si sabíamos quien era el líder del senado, nadie dijo nada, después pregunto si sabíamos quien era el speaker of the house y el cuarto se quedo en silencio por segundos que parecían una eternidad. Aquí nos dimos cuenta que teníamos muchas cosas que aprender y aunque al salir de la reunión tuvimos más preguntas que respuestas, tambien sabíamos que íbamos a seguir trabajando con los jovenes para que ellos adquirieran el conocimiento que nosotros apenas estábamos acaparando.

(en Worthington)

Mariano: ¿Vamos a ganar las licencias? Claro que si. ¿Y que más? La reforma inmigratoria. ¿Josefina, y usted que quiere?

Josefina: Yo quiero la reforma inmigratoria, quiero igualdad para todos, sobretodo en el trabajo porque no esta pareja la cosa. Quiero que



el racismo y el odio racial que hay ahorita baje, que nos vean como personas iguales que somos como ellos, que nos les venimos a quitar su trabajo, solo queremos lo mejor para nuestros hijos.

Niñas: Queremos más escuelas para que haya mas doctoras y maestras para que los niños puedan hacer lo que ellos quieran hacer.

Martha's Story

Martha Ockenfels-Martinez, Youth Organizer for MIFN

It took me three years to find a home within the University of Minnesota. I finally found my niche when I stumbled upon two classes. The first was a Chicano Studies history course. At that time I did not identify as Chicana/o, and given that I had never taken a class that focused on my mother's people's history, I was surprised that the books we read told *my story*. It was the story of the farmworkers, of the beet-pickers, of the earliest Mexicanos to arrive and settle in Minneapolis, and of my family. The second course was a Spanish class titled "Service-Learning in the Chicano/Latino Community," and I was placed with the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride (IWFR) because I had wanted to work with an immigrant rights organization. After watching relatives deal with the damage this country's immigration system can unleash upon a family, I felt the need to follow in the footsteps of my activist grandmother and my union-organizing father, and to become more involved with the social justice issues that affected my family and my community.

I began my internship at the IWFR tentatively, given that I had never worked with a non-profit before, and I wasn't quite sure what to expect. It's funny now, thinking back to my first days as an intern, when I would struggle to memorize every piece of information that was given to me on a fact sheet or a brochure, so that I would know the complete history and the work of the IWFR. Mariano and Quito were the only



staff members at the time, and they wanted the interns to infuse their own creativity and passion into the work we were doing. I really appreciated this approach to a creating non-hierarchical atmosphere, and their manner of working with me as an intern has greatly influenced the way that I myself now work with interns.

My first major project was organizing an educational forum on the MN Dream Act⁷ at the University with a team of four other interns – it was the first time the IWFR had an event on campus. That was my first experience in creating a program, contacting speakers, creating a flyer, as well as generating a strategy for outreach so that people would actually come to the event. I still remember feeling relieved when people began filling the seats of the auditorium, and I will never forget the overwhelming feeling of witnessing power as we all listened to one of the student speakers share his story with the audience. He told us the story of his family, of his struggle with the educational system, and of his desire to fight for college access. The tears he shed weren't for dramatic effect, and while some cried with him, all of us were shaken by the story – and that's when I first realized the power that is our voices, our stories.

The event went smoothly and many people stayed after the program to find out how to get more involved, thrusting me into a position I didn't quite know how to handle. I had just barely pulled off my first semester of being an *intern*; how was I supposed to know how to direct others who wanted to work with us? I had to learn by doing – I had to make the path by walking – and I realize now that this style of acquiring knowledge and skills is part of the beauty of the work that we do.

The next semester the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride morphed into the MIFN, and they hired me to work parttime. My job included assisting the Youth Organizer as well as taking care of various administrative needs. During this time we began to convene for weekend-long planning retreats to figure out the structure for our



Quito Ziegler/MN Immigrant Freedom Network



The MIFN was formed in the wake of the national Immigrant Worker's Freedom Ride of 2003 and the Minnesota Freedom Ride of 2004. Both events were held in the tradition and spirit of the Civil Rights movement, replicating the model of the 1960s freedom rides to call for humane and just changes to America's outdated immigration laws. Here a student leader is pictured sharing her story with a legislator in out-state Minnesota during the 2004 Minnesota Freedom Ride.

Yes I Can Dream! curriculum. The idea behind the curriculum was to create a space within the schools where immigrant and allied youth could voice their opinions, stories, and personal histories around immigration and education. We agreed that we wanted it to be based on the concept of Popular Education⁸, and I think it's important to note that we were also practicing this ideology as we worked together. Although I don't believe any of us had ever written a curriculum before, collectively we – high school students, college students, organizers, and immigrants – held within us the knowledge and the dreams that we needed to shape the concepts behind the curriculum.

We held informational sessions at La Raza Student Cultural Center to recruit students to be the facilitators (or coaches) of the curriculum in the schools. Many students showed up wanting to get involved with the



Our Yes I Can Dream! youth curriculum began by doing simple but powerful exercises that asked students to participate and learn organizing skills so they could be better equipped to take action and make positive changes in their community. In this photo, founding board member, Matt Musel (center), and Mariano (far right) train a group of youth at La Escuelita on the power people have when they come together to support an issue.

growing movement, and from these students we formed the cohort of coaches for the next semester. Needing a greater connection between the community work we were doing and the bachelor degrees we were attempting to attain, we worked out a plan with Professor Louis Mendoza so that we could take a Directed Studies course in Chicano Studies that was based on our work with the MIFN. We had begun the process of creating a stronger partnership between the MIFN and

students at the University through our ties with Chicano Studies, an academic department, and La Raza, a student cultural center.

After the service-learning class, and the Directed Studies course with Professor Mendoza, I was hooked. Attending school full-time while working part-time with an immigrant rights organization, I was not motivated by other classes that had nothing to do with the world outside the walls of the University. I thus began my life-saving habit of seeking out classes that incorporated community-based learning into the coursework, such as the Social Justice classes, other Chicano Studies courses, and Independent and Directed Studies classes.

That first year we implemented the curriculum I was a coach at both Northfield High School and Lakeville High School. And I absolutely loved it. I smile to think of how frightened my co-coach Sylvia and I were on that first day. Even though we knew the lesson, it was our first time actually facilitating the curriculum with students. Although the nervousness didn't end with the first lesson, the energy that the students had while engaging with the material made us eager to continue our discussions with them.

As we progressed with the curriculum, it became clear that some students had never been offered an experience such as this one before. More than once, a student would share their personal history and migration story with the class, and afterwards one or two classmates would burst out with "Oh, I didn't know that about you!" or "I didn't know your story was so much like mine!" Through our conversations we developed a community within the classroom. Almost all of the students wanted to go to college to follow their dreams, although they knew that it would be extremely difficult to fight the barriers that stood between them and their school of choice. We discussed the reasons *why* such barriers existed, not only for students to better understand the history that was keeping themselves and their peers from continuing



Hundreds of Latino, immigrant and allied youth gathered at the 2008 Student Day at the Capitol in St. Paul to voice their need for access to an equal education, regardless of income level or immigration status.

their education, but for them to begin conceptualizing ways to *change* this unequal situation.

Last year 1,000 students gathered for our fourth-annual Student Day at the Capitol to educate legislators on the crisis that both the educational system and the state of Minnesota is facing. Immigrant and allied students stood together on this day to tell their stories and their dreams, to illustrate the need for legislation that will ensure access to higher education for all students. Each year I listen as the students develop their voices through their work with the coaches and the curriculum, and without fail, each and every time I hear a student speak not just for



A young student leader addresses the crowd at the Capitol, discussing why it's important for legislators and decision-makers to institute policies that open up the doors of access to education for all youth, regardless of immigration status or income level.

the sake of practice, but to change someone's mind and heart, I am still struck by that same feeling of being a witness to power.

After three years of working in some capacity with the MIFN (as an intern, a volunteer, or a part-time employee), it was inevitable that my experiences from organizing would deeply influence how I participated in my college courses, and how I viewed the world. During my last year of college I took a few graduate level courses, and I was shocked by the oppressive viewpoints sometimes put forth by the older (and supposedly more educated) students in the class. Their world view was



Dusty Hoskove/MN Immigrant Freedom Network

Allies, college-level coaches and young middle-school students are pictured walking from a church to the Student Day at the Capitol in 2007. All came together to take action to remove the institutional barriers standing in the way of a college education for immigrant and Latino youth.

In January 2007 hundreds of Worthington immigrant community members came together to share food and speak out during the public forum against the December 12, 2006 raid in which Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents deployed into the heart of rural America to shut down the city and the nation's number-two meatpacking plant, Swift and Co.

constructed by academic theories and statistics that were based on data tainted with classism, racism, and sexism. Fortunately, I had grown stronger through my work with the MIFN, and so I was able to use my voice to offer a different perspective, and to create with them a deeper understanding of the issue in question, one that expanded beyond the walls of academia.

I am now employed full time as the Youth Organizer for the MIFN, and in my four years of growing and working with the organization, I have seen the real life-changing effects that our collaboration with college and high school students has had on everyone involved in the process. I only hope that partnerships such as these continue to thrive and grow because I know from experience how valuable and rewarding it can be to bridge the worlds of academia and community together.



Quito Ziegler/MN Immigrant Freedom Network



Our Voices

Alondra Kiawitl Espejel, MIFN Communication Director

Stories are powerful. How these important stories are told, who gets to tell them, and who owns the infrastructure through which they pass are important pieces on the chessboard of justice.—Center for Media Justice (Oakland, California)

It is important to be able to tell your story, especially if you are coming from a marginalized community. Yet for some of us, it is a struggle to find our voice and share our stories. Almost 20 years ago my family decided to pursue a better life and opportunities in the US, so at the age of ten I was sent to live with my cousins in rural Minnesota. Even though I went to school, I couldn't communicate with my teacher or classmates because I didn't know how to speak English. I didn't fully understand what it meant to be one of two students of color in my whole class, but I could feel the disconnection and loneliness. When I was in high school I hid my story behind mind-numbing good grades and exhausting runs with the cross country team. After applying to only one college, I arrived at the University of Minnesota's business school. One of my scholarships required me to volunteer off-campus, so I began to tutor at after-school sites helping other poor kids like me with their homework. The distance between my marketing classes and the after-school programs made it painfully difficult for me to understand what I was doing in college. I'm not referencing the long bus rides from one location to the other, I'm pointing to the stark differences between the under-funded community centers filled with young English Language Learners outfitted with clothes barely warm enough to fend off the cold and the corporate-sponsored classrooms neatly stacked with human bodies wearing expensive suits, or designer lip gloss, or freshly coiffed hair.

I felt confused, frustrated and angry for having to navigate such different, yet inextricably related worlds. How could so much privilege



coexist alongside so much oppression? As business school academics continued to mute the sounds of injustice tugging at my vocal chords, I became more distant from my studies. The incongruence between my linear school work and my off-campus commitments put everything in question and I strained to find a foothold. Perhaps that is why, a year or two after trying to stay afloat in business school, an email from La Raza Student Cultural Center advertising an event for *Dias de los Muertos* and *chamurrado* struck a major chord. The history La Raza students spoke about, their well-built relationship with the Department of Chicano Studies and their campus organizing turned my throat's muted sounds into a steady hum of resistance. I continued to volunteer off-campus, held a job at the University's Career and Community Learning Center, and increased my activity with La Raza as I sought more ethnic studies courses. I was looking to make sense of what rumbled on the inside. I could feel my voice getting stronger, my story getting clearer, my footsteps feeling lighter.

As I became more entrenched in on-and-off campus organizing efforts to open the doors of access to higher education for Latino and immigrant youth, I transferred out of the business school and began to look for ways to make my life and practical experiences count towards a new degree. I majored in Chicano Studies and enrolled in African American and American Studies courses; some used the service-learning language, others didn't, but all encouraged off-campus learning opportunities. The alienation seeping from the university realms that are drenched in privilege threatened to take me away from the immigrant community I knew to be home. Therefore, my personal and university survival depended on creating and tapping into classes where the teachers and the coursework sought to integrate my story and community work into the goals and objectives of the class. Enrolling in Chicano Studies and service-learning courses nurtured and validated my identity, encouraged my academic success by challenging mainstream notions of knowledge production and kept me connected to the community I had come from. But even as I unearthed my voice and united with many others in chants



for equal access to education for all, I began to understand that our immigrant voices would not be heard and sound public policy would not be passed unless we changed the structure of media ownership (the people who decide what stories get told) and the very policies media are supposed to follow (the official and unofficial practices that dictate how stories get told). This understanding of media justice is one of the main reasons why, only a few days after Minnesota's Republican Governor delivered a vicious anti-immigrant blow, the MIFN's media and communications work was born.

On December 8, 2005 Governor Pawlenty issued a so-called report titled "The Impact of Illegal Immigration on Minnesota." According to Quito Ziegler, then Co-Director of the MIFN, the Governor had publicly declared war on the immigrant community. This observation is not to be taken lightly as history has proven that discursive violence is one step away from real-lived violence and oppression. The Governor – with a microphone in one hand and his so-called report in the other – delivered the mythical story that immigrants drain the state. The media, an active player in the public's perception of our immigrant community, eagerly covered the report's publication, thereby helping to propagate the Goliath of a lie. Instead of expanding the frame of how the issue of immigration got covered, the media adopted a formulaic frame of "costs versus benefits" which sought to put a monetary value on our lives and humanity.

Three days after the release of the report, community organizers, funders, students, youth workers, educators, legislators and business owners met to tell the story of the Minnesota we knew to be true – the story of a state whose economic growth, cultural vitality, and global survival depend on the hands of immigrant workers, on the minds of immigrant students, and on the transnational connections of immigrant families.⁹ Although we had to cater to the limited media framework of "additive" stories (i.e. what do immigrants add to the state?), we were ultimately craving to hear immigration stories that breathed complexity.



We talked about stories that mirrored our humble realities, rejoiced in our laughing children and championed human rights. Yet the non-inclusive frame of the media and the Governor's report kept our voices out. Not surprisingly, a month later, the constant omission of our stories along with the media's sensationalistic coverage of the Governor's anti-immigrant actions, served as a launching pad for him to enact 287G, a costly and racial-profiling-based program in which state troopers and other local officials are deputized to enforce immigration laws.

In response, as an immigrant led and primarily immigrant staffed organization, we created the Voices of Immigrants Changing and Educating Society (VoICES) program aimed at humanizing the face of immigration in the media. Since 2006, we have positioned our communications work as a participatory educational campaign to reclaim the public discourse by targeting allies, mainstream media editorial policies, and stylebooks to abolish the usage of the terms "illegal alien" and "illegal immigrant" when covering the issue of immigration. At its deepest level, this campaign works to eliminate the institutional racism and institutional violence aimed at our immigrant community vis-à-vis the status quo of media policies, structure and framing.

One of our biggest accomplishments since has been achieved through a partnership with University of Minnesota service-learning students and activists from the La Raza Student Cultural Center. After several meetings, our organization, along with the students, was able to push the *Minnesota Daily*¹⁰ to change their editorial policies to abolish the usage of the terms "illegals" and "illegal immigrant." Although the work was neither easy nor formulaic, the constant and organic pressure from several students and campus groups along with our support helped to achieve this collective victory. We have also engaged with other prominent news organizations such as the *Star Tribune* and Minnesota Public Radio to raise awareness about this issue with their editors.



Additionally, college students in service-learning classes who act as high school coaches are working in partnership with us to improve students' proficiency in the area of media literacy and communications (reading, writing, critical thinking skills) through the media lesson we include in our curriculum. The media lesson, and our curriculum as a whole, is based on a long-standing Chicano Studies tradition of intellectual exploration and civic engagement, linking action to analysis,¹¹ and heeds scholar-activists' advice that "students are far more apt to remember and be transformed by what they do" than by what they read.¹² Thus, the high school youth analyze the content of a set of media clips that they themselves generate when they take action through civic engagement methods. This participatory media lesson and overall curriculum supports students in their journey to develop their leadership skills while encouraging them to take on the role of change makers. In this way the youth themselves are removing the educational barriers they face when trying to graduate from high school or gearing up to pursue a college degree. Our curriculum is also a college access tool that gives students information about their college-going options and scholarships.¹³ Consequently, as the youth become more informed about their options they also become more engaged in their school life and community. As they become more active and interested in their educational life, they start seeing themselves as college-material and become their own ambassadors, actively shaping their own future through collective action, enhanced communications and increased community building activities during the after-school hours.

These efforts are a prime example of how college and high school youth can work alongside one another and with social change organizations to play an important role in humanizing the ways in which society perceives the immigrant community, thereby countering the negative effects of the media. More importantly, as the high school youth begin to unearth their voice and sharpen their advocacy skills, service-learning students and university allies are given the opportunity to work hand-in-hand with the immigrant community from a socio-cultural asset-based perspective. This



recognizes the fact that immigrants are not "needy" individuals waiting for someone to rescue them; instead, we are intellectually nimble people who invite you to become an equal player in the "chessboard of justice" and knowledge production.

Conclusion: Limitless Dreams, Rooted Realities

Armed with unwavering hope for a better world, we continue our work as equal partners in this journey for justice and encourage many others to join us. What our stories have shown is our limitless ability to dream of a society where the systematic dehumanizing of people through language and the denial of access to educational opportunities exist no more. When speaking of immigration, we believe that the proliferation of covert institutionalized racism perpetuated under the banner of the "rule of law, fairness, and citizenship" must be challenged. After all, as Saint Augustine once said, an unjust law is no law at all. For that reason, our stories and service-learning collaborations are aimed at removing institutional barriers, serving as a living testament to how we have turned our dreams into community-rooted strategies based on our lived realities.

As we look to the work that lies ahead, we provide no formula nor offer fool-proof solutions. What we offer is a window into the intimate and organic nature of our endeavor, highlighting the deep yet flexible commitment this kind of journey entails. At the same time, we encourage community-based organizations, college campus affiliates, policymakers and funders to prepare for the momentous shifts just around the bend. Soon, minorities will grow into majority status, thereby providing all of us with an immense opportunity to turn our commitments to educational access and social change into an inclusive democracy enriched by everyone's fully realized potential, regardless of immigration status. It is now, more than ever, that our schools and communities will need more collaborative projects like ours which energetically work to unite seemingly different worlds.

Endnotes

¹ *El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education*. Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education. La Causa Publications, Oakland, 1969. This manifesto was a collectively authored document that articulated the philosophical foundation for the establishment of Chicano Studies in higher education.

² As an academic enterprise, this field of study assumes various names, such as Raza Studies, Mexican American Studies, and Chicano-Latino Studies, to name a few. Moreover, there are related fields such as Borciua or Puerto Rican Studies, and Latino, Latino/Latin American, or Hispanic Studies Programs that each have their own distinctive history and sometimes include Chicano Studies within their domain.

³ See Carlos Munoz's *Youth, Identity, and Power*, Hector Galán's *Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement, Part III, Taking Back the Schools*, and Moctesuma Esparza's feature film, *Walkout* for sustained treatments of Chicana/o educational activism in the late '60s and early '70s.

⁴ <http://nces.ed.gov/FastFacts/display.asp?id=16>. Accessed online: 01/06/09.

⁵ Minnesota Minority Education Partnership. *2009 State of Students of Color & American Indian Students Report, Executive Summary: 11*.

⁶ "Disciplinary Pathways to Service-Learning: Theory and Rationale." By Susan J. McAleavey. <http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/other/engagement/pathways/rationale.shtml>. Accessed online: 01/06/09.

⁷ The Minnesota Dream Act is a bill that would allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition at Minnesota universities and colleges. Otherwise, they have to pay three times the in-state tuition rate, even if they have spent most of their lives being active members of Minnesota's communities. This too often makes college unattainable for many promising students.

⁸ Popular Education is the world view that all of us are at the same time learners *and* teachers – with an emphasis on not privileging certain knowledges above others.

⁹ At the time of this meeting I was a board member of the MIFN and worked in the Department of Chicano Studies. Some months later, I stepped down from the MIFN board and applied to become an MIFN staff member.

¹⁰ *The Minnesota Daily* is the largest university-based newspaper in Minnesota.

¹¹ Martinez, Elizabeth (Betita) and Max Elbaum. "Building New Roads to Liberation." *ColorLines*, Fall 2005: 19.

¹² Pulido, Laura. "FAQS: Frequently (Un)Asked Questions on Being a Scholar/Activist." *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Ed. Charles Hale. Berkeley: UC Press, 2008. 348.

¹³ This is particularly important in Minnesota as it's one of the states with the highest student-to-counselor ratio.