

Change culture and attitudes to get it right on immigration reform

By Rev. Ryan M. Eller

For weeks this past summer, pro-immigrant organizations and community members scrambled together to reunite children with mothers and fathers and end the inhumane separation of families at the border.

As I wrote in my NCRP blog post just a couple of months ago, it is important to move from rapid response to lasting change.¹ When we scramble to respond in these moments, we need to scramble knowing that a solution is also coming. But that permanent fix won't take place without shifting cultural attitudes toward immigrants. Below I offer three specific ways we can do this with the help of grantmakers and donors.

LOOKING BEYOND COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM

Over the last several decades, the primary strategy of the immigrant freedom movement has been to enact legislative reform via comprehensive immigration policies. And funders, understanding how critical it is to ensure legal protection to immigrants, have invested millions into pushing these efforts forward. Yet, for many different reasons, we've not seen the hoped-for results.

Our recent history is evidence that investing energy only on policy reform can lead to harmful results. For example, even though then-president Barack Obama issued an executive order calling for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that enabled over 800,000 young people to continue to contribute to their communities tem-

porarily without fear of deportation, he deported more immigrants than any other president in our country's history. By 2016, he had deported 2.5 million people, earning him the title among many advocates as "Deporter in Chief." The administration's belief at that time, as it is now under Donald Trump, was that being tough on immigrants would spark congressional action. It didn't work then. It won't work now. And, in the end, families are the ones who suffer.

A CULTURE WAR THAT DEHUMANIZES IMMIGRANTS

While our movement is investing in ballot measures and bills, the anti-immigrant movement is investing in a cultural narrative that has successfully

convinced the public that immigrants are our enemy and ought to be feared.

In 2016, the four largest national anti-immigrant organizations – NumbersUSA, Center for Immigration Studies, Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), US Inc. – reported nearly \$32 million in cash assets to use toward anti-immigrant research, media influence and political "education" work, which increasingly cements their hateful rhetoric into American culture.

Since the 2008 election of President Obama, America's first non-white president, these groups have grown an average of 12 percent annually, with the largest of these (FAIR) growing its operating revenue by 73 percent between 2014 and 2016, alone despite being labeled as hate groups by the Southern



Members and leaders of Define American Chapters at the first chapters summit at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Define American Chapters are student-led initiatives to bring the conversation on immigrants and identity home to their college communities. Students receive the tools to reach out to people who have different opinions and backgrounds, and create opportunities for mutual understanding.

Poverty Law Center. “The more they go after us, the more money flows in (from donors),” said Dan Stein, president of FAIR, to the *DailyMail.com* just last month.²

These skyrocketing new funds have enabled these groups to scale even more dramatically among online and media audiences. Through fear-mongering, divisive discourse and inaccurate studies often amplified not just by *Fox News* and conservative radio but also by outlets like *The Washington Post*, *CNN* and *The Wall Street Journal*, these anti-immigrant groups have embedded a toxic narrative that vilifies and dehumanizes immigrants. Studies suggest that white nationalist sentiments are growing among specific segments of the population, particularly in the South and Midwest. Further, recent research has shown that the perception that an overwhelming number of Americans support pro-immigrant politics is severely misleading.

Part of the reason for this is that, staggeringly, more than 25 leaders from within the aforementioned hate groups now hold senior positions in the Trump administration, which gives them an even more powerful platform to exploit the fear they have embedded in the hearts and minds of Americans. They are extremely successful in this effort: even among hate groups, anti-immigrant hate groups have been measured to have the most pernicious and vitriolic messaging on social media (above anti-Muslim and anti-Black groups), and the biggest followings among hate groups.

According to a recent study commissioned by Unbound Philanthropy in 2018, these anti-immigrant groups have activated a conservative base that believes immigration, legal and illegal, is the number one threat to America today. Meanwhile, among segments of the population that are the most pro-immigrant, the issue of immigration itself falls to seventh or eighth on their list of priorities compared with other concerns.



Film festival attendees talk at the first annual Define American Film Festival at the Des Moines Art Center in Des Moines, Iowa on Saturday, January 23, 2016. Photo by Michael Conti/Define American

While the anti-immigrants are riled into a sense of urgency to keep immigrants out, pro-immigrants don't feel nearly the same urgency to fight back.

SHIFTING CULTURAL ATTITUDES BY CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

While some look at the re-election of new leaders as a solution, the truth is that anti-immigrant sentiment did not begin with Trump, and it won't end the day he leaves office. All he has done is fan the flames of xenophobia and exploit an existing undercurrent of fear and blame that has long percolated below our country's surface.

So, the real question is: How do we rehumanize the conversation about immigrants when it has become so dehumanizing?

A comprehensive solution requires both policy and culture change. Policy change is fundamentally necessary to protect struggling communities; culture change is a critical part of facilitating policy shifts. We cannot improve the politics of immigration until we improve the cultural lens through which our nation's 43 million immigrants – 11 million of whom are undocumented – are perceived and seen.

In a December 2016 study reported by *The New York Times*,³ researchers discovered a startling correlation between a person's choice of presidential candidate and the television shows he or she watches. This correlation was stronger than with any other variable,

including political party or who a person voted for in the previous election. In July 2018, an NPR/Ipsos poll⁴ found similarly that the TV news that a person consumes is the strongest predictor of his or her feelings on immigration – stronger, even, than said person's political party.

These findings demonstrate the inextricable connection among media, culture and politics. For America to truly become a welcoming country and ultimately bring about much-needed legislative change, we need a comprehensive strategy that recognizes the critical role of media narratives in shaping culture and public perception.

Recently, Define American worked with major Hollywood influencer Shonda Rhimes to develop a storyline on the top-rated show *Grey's Anatomy* featuring a DACA-recipient surgical intern. Seen by an average of 8 million viewers per episode, *Grey's Anatomy* is among the top-10 most-watched television shows among Trump voters and in rural America. By creating a character that counters the dominant and toxic narrative about undocumented Americans, projects like this allow us to reach into the homes and hearts of people who may not otherwise be willing to listen to the other side of the story.

3 WAYS TO REHUMANIZE IMMIGRANTS

We can't keep fighting these fights just to come back in two years and fight them again. As separate as these issues may seem, shows like *Grey's Anatomy* have the power to influence who we are as a nation, and we who are as a nation determines how silently we will sit by as we watch families being torn apart.

Policy and culture create a feedback loop that creates significant shifts in how we define what it means to be an American. To be effective in this work,

we need more funders who help us advance these primary goals:

- **Change the way news media talks about immigrants**

Legislative reform is difficult when the language around immigration has been polarized and weaponized.⁵ Define American's #WordsMatter campaign has successfully worked with more than 20 news organizations to change their style guides, no longer using dehumanizing language like "illegal" when referring to people. To have a more humanizing conversation on immigration, we have to start by using humanizing language.

We also have to end the power and influence of anti-immigrant organizations in inaccurately framing these conversations. This summer, Define American launched a full-scale #SourcesMatter campaign to expose the influence that FAIR, CIS, NumbersUSA, US Inc. have had in shaping the language and national discourse on immigration. This campaign will put pressure on journalists to abide by professional standards and always acknowledge these sources as hate groups when citing them, and raise public awareness about these groups and their ties to eugenics and white nationalism.

- **Build empathy through storylines in entertainment media**

Entertainment and pop culture tell stories about topics both new and familiar and provide narratives that help us figure out how we feel on a given topic. Entertainment media can serve as educator, influencer and a social script, particularly for the 91 percent of white people in America who, according to *MTV News*,⁶ reportedly do not have meaningful relationships with non-white people.

Define American has always recognized entertainment media as a

critical tool for reshaping the way that the public thinks about and perceives immigrants. It works with more than 23 top-rated television shows on networks like NBC, CBS, Netflix, Hulu and MTV to educate writers and producers on immigration and embed humanizing storylines, building empathy and promoting understanding across tens of millions of viewers each week.

- **Create welcoming communities through local organizing**

Culture change is, by definition, broad and large-scale, and it can take root in multiple forms. In addition to the national media shifts, local organizers and advocates also need to work in their communities to stimulate more cultural shifts.

Define American currently has 55 chapters in more than 22 states. We train young people and influencers to work with local media to shift conversations about immigrants, citizenship and identity within strategic regional zones.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center,⁷ hate groups are now recruiting on college campuses more heavily than any other time in U.S. history. Our chapters program provides a space for young people of all backgrounds to connect and grow as advocates and allies.

People often think that cultural shifts happen on their own, but the reality is that they don't. Somewhere along the way, there is a group of people that invested in pushing it in one direction or the other. ■

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Notes

1. Read the post on <https://www.ncrp.org/2018/08/rapid-response-support-is-important-but-immigration-funders-must-also-invest-in-shifting-culture.html>.
2. Valeri Bauman, "Anti-immigration group FAIR achieves new political clout in Trump's America, drawing more donations, followers and getting their own people in power – despite being labeled a hate group," *DailyMail.com*, August 27, 2018, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6103189/Anti-immigration-group-FAIR-achieves-new-political-clout-Trumps-America.html>.
3. Josh Katz, "'Duck Dynasty' vs 'Modern Family': 50 Maps of the U.S. Cultural Divide," *The New York Times*, December 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/26/upshot/duck-dynasty-vs-modern-family-television-maps.html>.
4. NPR, "NPR/Ipsos Poll: American Views on Immigration Policy, Press Release, July 16, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/about-npr/629415700/npr-ipsos-poll-american-views-on-immigration-policy>.
5. David Nakamura, "'Language as a weapon': In Trump era, immigration debate grows more heated over what words to use," *The Washington Post*, January 21, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/language-as-a-weapon-in-trump-era-immigration-debate-grows-more-heated-over-what-words-to-use/2018/01/21/d5d9211a-fd6a-11e7-a46b-a3614530bd87_story.html.
6. "MTV Delves Into Looking Different," *Blog.Viacom*, July 17, 2014, <http://blog.viacom.com/2014/06/mtv-delves-into-looking-different/>.
7. Heidi Beirich and Susy Buchanan, "2017: The Year in Hate and Extremism," *Intelligence Report*, 2018 Spring Issue, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2018/2017-year-hate-and-extremism>.