Editorial

A new day for Latinos?

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On 3 December 2012, over 600 young people, leaders of the national movement fighting for passage of the Dream Act, met in Kansas City to discuss their next steps. They unanimously approved a platform that seeks to secure a path to citizenship for the Dreamers and also fights for comprehensive reform for the over 11 million undocumented people in the United States. In addition, the Dreamers broadened their agenda with a call for access to health care, safe working conditions and equal protection under the law for all. Furthermore, the Dreamers declared that they will create a more expansive movement inclusive of LGBTQ people, people of all faiths and differently abled people.¹ The Dreamers, whose courage and audacity have repeatedly inspired us, once again set an example for all of us, this time about moving beyond pragmatic concerns and striving for more ambitious goals.

What motivated the Dreamers to expand their reach? Their success in prodding President Obama to defer deportation for many young people in June 2012 (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program), combined with the results of the 2012 presidential election, led them and many others to declare that the sleeping giant has awakened. Pundits of all political stripes have argued that the election is a game changer for Latinos. The continued growth of the Latino community and changing demographics of the country, the overwhelming Latino support for Obama (over 70 per cent), the unexpectedly high rates of voting (12 million Latinos who constituted 10 per cent of the electorate), and the impact of Latino votes in swing states seem to suggest that moving forward, Latinos should have more political influence and an enhanced ability to enact a national agenda that positively affects our communities on a broad range of issues. Observers across the political spectrum agree that immigration reform must be addressed and conservatives have dropped talk of “self-deportation” as a solution to the problem of a broken immigration system, at least for now. However, it remains to be seen whether this current rhetoric is indicative of a significant turning point in our nation’s trajectory or if politics as usual concerning Latinos will prevail.

Like the Dreamers, Latino scholars recognize that we too have a role to play to propel these declarations of a new day for Latinos beyond talk and towards substantive change. As Arturo Madrid (2012) stated in his keynote address,

¹ See the United We Dream press release dated 3 December 2012, <http://unitedwedream.org/united-we-dream-pledges-to-fight-for-fair-treatment-and-citizenship-for-dreamers-families-and-communities>, accessed 8 December 2012.

“Their America, Our América and Our Responsibility as Latina/o Scholars” at the most recent Puerto Rican Studies Association meeting,

We must take up our responsibilities as persons with the stature and armature required to challenge entrenched power, and the modes and money that support it: that is, as a community of scholars who are able to analyze the basis of power; who have the authority to expose its contradictions and weaknesses; who can identify and respond to conceptualizations and discourses that delimit, dismiss, or denigrate us; who have the standing to speak truth to power as well as the venues from where to do so; and who can identify our commonalities and develop ways and means to address them.

Madrid makes clear that beyond generating cutting edge research on the issues that are crucial to our communities, like that which fills the pages of this journal, we have a responsibility to participate in ongoing debates and make our voices heard on policies and practices that affect Latinos. We need to speak up at every opportunity and in all venues possible, from academic publications to news media and social media. We need to use our privilege and our skills to enact positive change. Many of our colleagues are engaged at this level, and below I highlight just a few efforts that serve as a reminder that we have the power to impact debates on issues that matter to Latinos.

Latino Studies highlighted one such effort last year with the essay by Lorgia García Peña (2012) on Georgia’s Freedom University. This faculty-led and supported initiative was organized to resist callous policies that render higher education out of reach for undocumented students. Four professors strategized and found a “third way” to give students at least partial access to the education that they deserve. With volunteers, donations and the determination to address an injustice, they inaugurated their university in October 2011 with one class of 32 students. Today, Georgia’s Freedom University has 60 students and five professors, a paid assistant, and runs a series of classes in literature, intellectual thought, ethnic studies and history. Faculty members are also working to help students secure college admission and financial support in universities and colleges across the United States (Sanders, 2012).

Faculty and students have lobbied their state legislators and as a result 12 states have approved some version of the Dream Act. Professors and students around the country are advocating for undocumented students by pressing their universities to offer them admission and financial assistance. In Illinois, in the last academic year, Dominican University provided US\$274,000 in private financial aid to 17 undocumented students. They joined other universities across the country (Berkeley recently announced a 1 million dollar scholarship fund) that are setting aside special funds to assist undocumented students. And faculty and staff at the Latino Resource Center of Northern Illinois University created a

manual² to inform faculty, administrators and students about the resources available for undocumented students.

A final example is the Drop the I-word Campaign. Promoted by Jonathan Rosa and other linguistic anthropologists, this campaign has been urging news organizations like *The New York Times* and the Associated Press to stop using the term “illegal” when referring to undocumented people in the United States.³ As we know, the language we use to frame a debate has a powerful affect on the debate itself. “Illegal” is a dehumanizing term that serves to create distance and demonize not only undocumented people but also all Latinos by extension. The Drop the I-word Campaign is but one way that scholars can engage in this dialogue. We can work to change the language used in conversations around immigration in our classes, in op-ed papers in local and national newspapers, blogs, on Facebook, and other social media. Academics more so than anyone know that words matter. As Rosa (2012) reminds us, “While language change is not necessarily equivalent to social change, struggles over representations of immigration make it possible to imagine and enact an alternative politics of inclusion in this nation of immigrants.”

Although the examples I mention focus solely on immigration, this is but one of the issues before us. Other debates we need to weigh in on include discussions on modifying how the Census counts Latinos, increasing access to education and health care, expanding the range of Latino representations in the media, and many other matters of grave importance to our communities. Like the Dreamers, who encouraged by the much-heralded new political landscape for Latinos, have moved beyond their own particular issues and embraced a collective agenda, we scholars must act through our research and activism, doing our part to ensure that the post election pronouncements about enhanced Latino power move beyond rhetoric and become a reality.

References

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- Sanders, L. 2012. In a Secret Classroom in Georgia, Immigrants Learn to Hope. *Chronicle of Higher Education*: 10 December.

2 The manual is available at www.niu.edu/lrc/_pdf/Resource%20Guide.pdf.

3 The Drop the I-word statement is available at www.scribd.com/doc/108590424/I-Word-Statement.

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