Helping Immigration Issue Experts Change the Public Conversation:
A Study Circle Evaluation Brief

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In 2010, the FrameWorks Institute conducted a six-month long Study Circle (a community of practice focused on framing) with a set of influential leaders on immigration issues in Los Angeles, California. The purpose of the Study Circle was to help these leaders develop a common language for communicating effectively among immigration advocates and in doing so, produce a more constructive public dialogue about immigration issues. The Study Circle was sponsored by the California Endowment for Health and facilitated by FrameWorks Institute staff.

Immigration has always been a highly contested issue on the American political landscape. In recent years however, immigration has figured more prominently in public discourse and legislative debate. The events of 9/11 put greater pressure on policymakers to respond to the need to address the major cracks in the U.S. immigration system façade. This resulted in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, stricter border control and immigrant employment policies. At the state level, a barrage of legislative proposals meant to institute more stringent immigration policies have made it more difficult in some places for immigrants to get access to basic government services such as driver’s licenses, social programs, and health care.

We know from our research that Americans generally endorse the idea that the immigration system is broken and should be reformed (Gilliam 2010: 7). Yet, while there is a pretty universal understanding that the immigration system in the United States needs repair, many fear that recent legislative activity on immigration are too punitive in their impact on immigrants (particularly those who are undocumented) and veer too far in abridging due process and civil rights.

The public debate and recent legislative activity on this issue suggests that this could be an especially propitious moment for policy experts and advocates who want to better engage the public around immigration reform. The Supreme Court has agreed to hear legal challenges to state policies that restrict the civil liberties and rights of immigrants. In addition, the Obama Administration has shown some receptivity to reforming immigration reform policies and several Congressional proposals like the DREAM Act (which provides educational resources for the children of undocumented immigrants) have gained greater support from legislators.
Still there are many challenges facing immigration advocates. Chief among them is that the cacophony of voices presenting solutions among policy leaders is so diverse and wide ranging that average Americans have difficulty envisioning what “comprehensive immigration reform” might look like and why such reform makes sense. Without a shared discourse that connects to the way in which Americans understand this issue, it is unlikely that the current conversation will lead to consideration of the broader range of solutions posed credibly by immigration experts and advocates.

As a result, the Study Circle facilitated by the FrameWorks Institute in 2010 was meant to engage immigration advocates in the Los Angeles area in the ways that they might create a more constructive public dialogue about immigration reform issues. This evaluation brief from the Study Circle summarizes the feedback we received from a post-engagement survey and follow-up interviews with participants.

THE LEARNING ENGAGEMENT
In recognition of this potentially shifting landscape, the California Endowment in conjunction with the FrameWorks Institute convened a Strategic Frame Analysis™ Study Circle from March - October 2010. This intensive learning engagement was designed for immigration policy experts and advocates who wanted to strengthen their communications.

The Study Circle brought together 15 participants that represented 14 organizations working on issues related to immigration policy including health, education, legal support, law enforcement, civic participation, and the like.

More generally, Study Circles offer participants a training that consists of several major components:

- Frameworks’ review of a sample of each of the participants’ materials;
- 3 on-site trainings and 3 webinars facilitated by FrameWorks staff;
- a blog community moderated by FrameWorks staff for sharing of information and resources;
- access to FrameWorks’ online library;
- structured readings and assignments to provide participants a chance to practice their framing skills; and
- technical assistance from FrameWorks’ staff for the six month duration of the engagement.

In all, the Study Circle provides participants with substantive opportunities to reassess their communications practices and to incorporate empirically vetted recommendations for improving their practices.

THE EVALUATION METHODS
The primary focus of this evaluation is on an assessment of the effectiveness of the training and its impacts on the practices of the participants. As part of this evaluation, FrameWorks evaluation staff used two methods to collect substantive feedback about the training from participants. First, we asked participants to respond anonymously to a short follow-up survey sent via email. Second, we followed up the emailed surveys with telephone interviews with a select group of the participants who had substantially modified their communications practices based on FrameWorks research. In the follow-up interviews we asked participants to provide greater insight into the value of the training for them, the components they felt were most/least effective, what they felt were the main takeaways, the areas where they could have used more resources (or where they felt the training could have been improved), and to what end they have used the information/skills they acquired as a result of the training.

Of the fifteen participants, eight answered the emailed survey (anonymously) and three were asked to participate in a 15-20 minute follow-up interview. All participants reported that they have direct responsibilities as spokespersons on
issues related to immigrants in their current professional roles; 67% had graduate level educational backgrounds; none had participated in a FrameWorks training before; 80% had been in their current professional roles for 3 years or more.

The data from this evaluation were mostly qualitative in nature and that data was then coded across thematic categories, analyzed and organized to highlight the major issues identified by respondents. The few quantitative measures used in this evaluation were tabulated, integrated within the text, and occasionally appear in text boxes through the findings section.

THE COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE
FrameWorks’ research on immigration has revealed some significant communications challenges embedded in the public discourse on immigration. Common “traps” in public thinking about immigration include:

- the widespread belief that the immigration system is irreparably broken, undermining a sense of agency around this issue;

- the dominant values of Protection and Prevention in the patterns of media presentation, which lead public thinking back to punitive policy solutions; and,

- that public thinking about “immigration” defaults easily to “illegal immigration”, which undermines the conversation and gives it negative overtones from the start.

With respect to the latter, FrameWorks’ research also suggests that people often toggle between both their fear of, and admiration for, immigrants. As a result, what is presented by policy experts and immigration advocates as narratives about the economic and social value of immigrants to the nation, is quickly overtaken in the media and in public thinking. Instead, the narrative becomes about illegal (and thus, bad) immigrants who steal jobs from Americans, as well as about a government that refuses to use its police powers to do anything about it.

Without knowing where these traps lie in public thinking and how they are activated, policy experts and advocates often inadvertently trigger them in their public education and messaging efforts.

“I think it is crucial to get in the minds of our audiences and be more conscientious of how to craft our frames and messages.”

Study Circle Participant

To begin the process of helping participants navigate around these traps, FrameWorks conducted a review of materials submitted by the Study Circle participants. These materials reviews are critical in helping FrameWorks understand the patterns of presentation in participants’ messaging that act as triggers for unproductive frames. FrameWorks uses these reviews to make concrete recommendations about how to avoid those triggers and improve the impact of the messaging.

This review identified several principal challenges that seemed to characterize Study Circle participants’ messaging and to inadvertently activate traps in public thinking.

- First, participants tended to use a “crisis” frame to try to spark a sense of public urgency around the immigration issues. FrameWorks’ research has shown that crisis messages tend to be ineffective at moving public support for reform. Rather, those crisis messages actually add to “crisis fatigue” or public exasperation over the constant stream of messaging on a wide variety of issues each promising imminent national disaster if reforms aren’t enacted.

- Second, participants’ messaging tended
to adopt a strident tone – a tone the public would have trouble seeing as pragmatic and reasonable.

- Third, participant materials tended to appeal to public support for immigration reform based on episodic messaging. That is, the messaging often focused on telling stories of hardship about individual immigrants and their families without making an explicit connection to the ways in which public policies or systems change would help the immigrants and the broader communities in which they live.

- Fourth, participants often couched their discourse in terms of disparities between groups. FrameWorks’ research suggests that the discourse on disparities often cues up the kind of zero-sum thinking often associated with race and is unproductive for moving public support for policy reforms.

- Finally, participants both derided government for creating problems with immigration and then simultaneously proposed government-based solutions. This apparent conflict required some additional material about FrameWorks’ research on reframing the issue of government so that participants could address the topic of government in ways that would not derail the conversation about immigration reform.

The learning activities of the Study Circle and the technical assistance offered as part of it focused largely on helping participants understand how frame elements could be marshaled to address each of these issues. Participants were encouraged to use these frame elements to redesign their own messaging and, in doing so, to reframe the public conversation.

"Those of us in the advocacy world assume, whether consciously or unconsciously, that what moves us MUST move other people. Our organizations, I would venture to guess, have been using the same assumptions from the inception and we all communicate the same way. We try to scare our audience, sometimes rationalize with them with data, and then sometimes use catchy messaging like ‘jobs.’ But never do most advocacy organizations take a deep look at what they are saying and how it’s playing out.”

Study Circle Participant

THE REFRAMING SOLUTION

Participants in the Study Circle met with FrameWorks Institute staff – in person, virtually in webinars, as well as in conference calls. Participants were introduced to the fundamentals of Strategic Frame Analysis™, FrameWorks’ research on framing immigration, and useful applications that could be embedded in their work. These sessions were designed to help participants become familiar with FrameWorks’ recommendations about the effective use of values and simplifying models which have been empirically shown to increase public understanding of, and support for, immigration reform.

In particular, participants learned that two specific values are effective in orienting public discourse on immigration reform – Prosperity and Fairness between Places – as well how to embed those values seamlessly into their materials. Prosperity triggers the need to develop the “human and community resources vital to our ability to achieve a prosperous society” (Manuel, 2010). The value of Fairness between Places associates fairness with access to and distribution of services across all communities. This value calls upon the need to “level the playing field so that every community has access” to the resources they need to thrive (Manuel, 2010).

For example, here is a “before” and “after” snapshot of one participant using the Prosperity
value to re-orient a press statement that her organization released to criticize the passage of recent immigration legislation in Arizona.

A Before Snapshot

In America today, we see the human consequences of a flawed and untenable immigration system that undermines the pluralistic values of our country as a whole. In attempts to find a quick fix solution to this immigration problem, unfortunately, the state of Arizona has chosen to disregard our Constitutional values and instead, through passage of SB 1070 – the state seeks to divide families, institutionalize racial profiling and discourage crime reporting.

The “after” snapshot clearly invokes the values of Prosperity and Fairness between Places, both of which have been found in FrameWorks’ research to be integral components of an effective immigration message.

A Good Example of the Prosperity and Infrastructure Messages in Tandem

Representing one-fifth of all low-wage workers in the United States, undocumented immigrants are crucial part of our country’s economic engine. In March 2005, they comprised 24 percent of all workers employed in farming occupations, 17 percent in cleaning, 14 percent in construction and 12 percent in food preparation. Many of these industries would suffer economic hardship, or even grind to a halt, without these workers.

Why don’t they come legally and why don’t those here simply apply for legal status? Because, for the most part, there is no line to get into. There are only 5,000 visas a year for low-skilled workers while the estimated annual demand for such workers is 400,000. And the mechanisms by which those here illegally might apply for legal status, have almost all been cut off in recent years. The bottom line is that there is a Keep Out sign at our border and a Help Wanted sign just beyond it.

In addition to learning to deploy these two frame elements, Study Circle participants engaged in several assignments and discussions meant to develop their ability to: (1) strike an effective yet reasonable (rather than argumentative) tone in their materials; (2) situate their messages within thematic (rather than episodic) frames; (3) integrate causal chains in presenting the problems with the current immigration policies that lead to the need for reform; and (4) give greater meaning to statistical data they thought would help the public understand the magnitude of the immigration issues to be addressed.

Participants also learned that these values work best when they are used in conjunction with a simplifying model. Simplifying models are metaphors that restructure how the public thinks about and talks about an issue. In this way simplifying models aid people’s understanding of how an issue works. FrameWorks’ research has found that the simplifying model – the Infrastructure We Never Built – works well to explain why immigration reform is necessary and what should be its primary targets. More specifically, this model primes the public to think about immigration from a “systems” perspective (i.e. the kinds of policies, structures, regulations, etc.) that need to be in place to effectively address the contemporary immigration challenges facing the country.

A After Snapshot

In America today, we see the consequences of a flawed and untenable immigration system that undermines the nation’s prospects for prosperity and they social fabric of our country as a whole. Rather than take a long-term sustainable approach to dealing with the important issue of immigration, many states are taking shortcuts that are setting an unfortunate precedent. In particular, the state of Arizona has chosen a “low-road” strategy that, at best, disregards our Constitution and, at its worst, undermines its own prosperity and by extension, the prosperity of the nation. Instead, through passage of SB 1070 which in addition to other things, also divides families condones and institutionalizes racial profiling as well as discourages crime reporting. There is a much better way to address immigration and solutions on this issue that are being overlooked in favor of these ill-suited measures.

Assessment of the Study Circle

At the most basic level, FrameWorks strives to ensure that participants understand and can
effectively deploy more effective framing into their materials. One of the ways we do this is to work directly with participants to redesign the messaging in some of their organizational materials. Working directly with the participants allows us to help them to tailor the general reframing recommendations to their specific organizational priorities. In thinking about how participants apply the recommendations, we highlight the specific communications challenges below of three groups who participated in the Study Circle and cite their comments about the ways that they have been able to integrate the key findings in their work.

“A Profile of Three of the Fifteen Participating Groups in the Study Circle:

CAIR-LA. CAIR is the largest Islamic civil liberties group in the United States, and its office in LA works to promote issues related to Muslim-Americans in the Los Angeles area. While the organization has supported immigration issues in the past, the leadership felt that this topic should take a more prominent place on their membership agenda in light of recent anti-immigrant sentiment and policies.

The leadership was particularly concerned about the possible adoption of Arizona’s SB 1070 in other states that would lead to punitive actions against Muslim-Americans as well. The organization found enthusiastic support from their younger members to move in this direction but has stymied in efforts to move older Muslims in support of a more broadly focused immigration platform. In the words of a CAIR-LA representative, this was seen as “an issue that only affects certain communities, it seemed more like a Latino issue.” CAIR-LA used the Study Circle to reframe immigration in a way that would drive support of this issue from their membership as a whole. They have been working on a letter that they intend to send to their membership that incorporates these reframing strategies.

“After having the input of the Study Circle leader and the other participants, it’s helped to simplify our message and frame it by invoking Prosperity. With our older segment, Prosperity is a value that I think resonates with them. Prior to the Study Circle, it wouldn’t have crossed my mind to frame it in that way. Fairness between Places is another frame that is particularly compelling. The effects of SB 1070 create a precedent that can then be extended to myriad communities – ours included. In that sense, I think it is a frame that is effective. We now incorporate this frame not only in our newsletters, but in our “Know Your Rights” letters, in town hall meetings, and in one-on-one engagements with our community base.”

Ilham IIKoustaf, CAIR-LA

Californians Together. Californians Together is a coalition of organizations from the civil rights and education fields that mobilize for immigrant education. They have spent the past five years leading a statewide campaign at the school district level for a Seal of Bilingualism program. This program creates a pathway for immigrant and native-born students to achieve recognition for achieving fluency in two or more languages at the end of their high school career.

Californians Together have achieved great success through their grassroots campaign at the school district level. They have sought and won the support of the California School Board Association, the Association of California School Administrators, and the California Federation of Teachers. Thirty-three school districts have integrated the program and twenty-four districts are currently considering adoption. However, they needed help in communicating the benefits of this program to the larger public and to garner the support of additional school districts.
“In our communications about the program, we didn’t use the values of Prosperity or Fairness between Places before. Fairness between Places fits really well with the Seal of Biliteracy because it is for all communities. It is one of the reasons why districts buy into it. Now we integrate these frames often in our public communication, including press releases and op-ed articles in newspapers.”

Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, Californians Together

**USC Center for the Study of Immigration Integration.** The USC Center for the Study of Immigration Integration has been trying to mobilize local leaders in the Los Angeles area to create policies that improve livelihoods and civic participation of immigrants. During the Study Circle, this organization worked assiduously on a document that tries to delineate some basic policy principles of integrating immigrants into the community more fully. Their goal is to use this document to build member support for a new local council of policymakers committed to this issue.

“I wanted to use the Study Circle as a way to get feedback on this document and figure out what makes sense. I got a lot of constructive feedback from our Study Circle leader and the other participants. Now I need to do another redraft to make it more applicable. With these reframing strategies, we think this document is going to be successful in stating why immigrant integration is important.” Rhonda Ortiz, USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration

**OVERALL PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK**

At the end of the six-month intensive engagement with the Study Circle participants, we invited them to talk to us about the broader impact that being a part of this kind of learning community has had on them and on their institutions. Here are just a few of the things they had to say about that:

“I wrote an op-ed that was only possible because of the strategic framing practice I had. The op-ed was meant to highlight health centers and their work with farmworkers. This is a weird, hard topic to wrap into a letter to the editor. No one knows about the health centers, nor how they are connected to farmworkers. So I started with immigration because it’s a hot topic and I tied it to the ‘we’re all in this together’ economic prosperity frame.”

“I have all the FrameWorks reports printed out on my desk in a folder and have been referencing and thinking through them. I just recently wrote up a letter to the editor in a less urban area and thought about the positive frames of Prosperity and narrative. I am also able to identify some of the ways people have been framing their messaging on other issues with the FrameWorks tools.”

“In two specific press releases this year we did away with the issue of education ‘crisis’ for English learners and switched to the values of Prosperity and Fairness between Places. I think the simplified message of the ‘orchestra’ for the issue of school reform is a good one and we need to practice with it. I definitely see discussing it in context of the current ‘dialogue’ that is blaming the teachers for all of our ‘poor schools’ and ‘lack of student achievement.’”

“I’ve started to use framing methods promoted by FrameWorks in blog posts and other materials. It’s a bit difficult for me to move away from the traditional ‘inverted pyramid’ style of writing, but I am beginning to realize that by starting with a value, you may engage a greater number of people.”

**NEXT STEPS**

As part of the final Study Circle session, we asked participants to share with us what they
would hope would be next steps to enhancing their communications expertise. In addition, as part of our evaluation work, we asked them to tell us what kind of barriers they saw to being able to fully take advantage of the research. Their responses indicate at least one potential opportunity to continue to build the capacity in this group around communications.

- **Provide a Forum That Allows This Group to Continue to Support Each Other in Framing and Begin to Build a Community.** It was clear from our interactions with the participants that, although they were all doing some work related to immigration reform and that the organizations knew of each other, the specific people in the room had barely ever met. The Study Circle certainly gave this group a chance to come together around communications and to learn about framing together, but unless there is a vehicle that helps to keep the group cohesive and allows them to support each other in a broader way, the opportunity to help them become an influential community of effective framers will be lost.

In addition, the participants expressed substantive interest in having a space where they could continue to practice and develop their framing. As one participant said, the challenge coming out of the Study Circle was really in “thinking more deeply about messages and remembering to be conscious.”

Another suggested that the Study Circle should be lengthened to nine months, rather than six months, to give participants a chance to hone especially challenging framing topics, such as social math and context. “[For me], simplifying models, casual chains, and social math still need some more work.”

A forum to keep this conversation going and the group work developing would also be helpful in having this group “unite under one coherent vision for change.”

- **Help Policy Experts and Advocates Address the Institutional Barriers of Adopting New Frames.** Of all the comments received on the evaluations and in the final session, the presence of institutional barriers was most salient. As one participant wrote on her evaluation, “[Now] I have to convince my co-workers that this is a better way of communicating.” Another wrote that the only barrier she saw coming out of the Study Circle was “being able to bring more people ‘on board’ with this new way of delivering our messages. A need for training within the organization.”

Still another spoke to the institutional challenges of getting “buy in” from the broader array of stakeholders that her organization works with. “Buy-in from the spokespersons in my organization is critical. Also, because the majority of communicators on immigration reform are in Washington and did not participate in the Study Circle, we’ll be ‘off message’ if we use the FrameWorks principles.”

- **Conduct Specific Communications Capacity-Building Work Focused on Immigration Researchers.** Study Circle participants included two communications representatives from prominent local universities whose responsibility it is to engage public audiences about immigration related research emerging from those academic centers. In this work, and in other FrameWorks’ engagements with researchers and scientists, it is a slightly different task to help them understand why and how effective framing can benefit their work. As one of the university-based participants said, “My organization is a research center. It’s
been difficult to break through to them about framing issues and conveying values in written pieces. They keep thinking that their place is to remain disconnected from advocacy and to provide advocacy groups with the facts and research to help them reach their goals.”

- **Help Policy Experts and Advocates Respond to the Distraction of the Economic Climate.** Several of the participants wanted to understand the connections between immigration and taxes. In this political environment, funding for the work done by the organizations represented in the Study Circle and that supports the issues they advocate for is threatened. FrameWorks has significant research on how to talk about budgets and taxes, and we have shared the findings with the participants. In this way, research sponsored by other funders is applied to the issue of immigration, creating synergies across issue-specific groups.