



# Helping Immigration Issue Experts Change the Public Conversation

A FRAMEWORKS EVALUATION BRIEF

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## About FrameWorks Institute:

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies.

The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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Manuel, Tiffany and Shannon Arvizu. (2010). *Helping Immigration Issue Experts Change the Public Conversation*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It is a widely accepted tenet that America is a country of immigrants. Nonetheless, the country has struggled with determining the rules of inclusion. Advocates on both the left and the right are now actively trying to influence the scope and nature of immigration reform. Many support even tighter immigration policies; others fear that recent immigration legislation is too punitive and veers too far in abridging due process and civil rights. The public debate and recent legislative activity on this issue suggest that this could be an especially propitious moment for policy experts and advocates who want to better engage the public around immigration reform.

A critical, if perhaps not highly visible, consideration in this era of renewed advocacy is how strategic communications can be employed to frame the policy debate in ways that make a progressive policy agenda more accessible to the public. The moment may be ripe, but it could be wasted without more effective means of elevating the public discourse. The cacophony of voices presenting solutions is so diverse and fragmented that average Americans have difficulty envisioning what “comprehensive immigration reform” might look like, and why such reform makes sense. Previous FrameWorks research has found that Americans generally believe the immigration system is broken and should be reformed (Gilliam, 2010, p. 7). Yet, while there is a widely shared understanding that the immigration system in the United States needs repair, there is less consensus on what types of repairs are needed. Without a shared discourse that connects to the ways in which Americans understand this issue, it is unlikely that the current conversation will consider the broad, credible range of solutions posed by immigration experts and advocates.

## **PREPARING ADVOCATES TO REFRAME THE DEBATE**

In recognition of this potentially shifting landscape, the California Endowment for Health commissioned a set of research and learning activities to better understand and influence the patterns of public thinking about immigration. The initiative’s goal was to familiarize immigration advocates in the Los Angeles area with Strategic Frame Analysis™, a communications approach well-suited to equip these influential voices to create a more constructive public dialogue about immigration reform issues. To accomplish this goal, the Institute facilitated a six-month-long Study Circle, from March to October 2010, to teach diverse groups of experts, advocates, practitioners and policymakers in Los Angeles about the principles of Strategic Frame Analysis™ and how those principles could be used to catalyze a new public discourse about immigration. The Study Circles brought together 15 people working

across 14 organizations working on issues related to immigration policy, including health, education, legal support, law enforcement and civic participation. This intensive learning engagement was designed for immigration policy experts and advocates who wanted to strengthen their communications. All participants reported that they held direct responsibilities as spokespersons on issues related to immigrants in their current professional roles. Eighty percent had been in their current professional roles for three years or more, and 67 percent had graduate-level educational backgrounds. None had participated in a FrameWorks training before.

The Study Circle offered participants a training that consisted of several major components:

- FrameWorks' review of a sample of each of the participants' existing communication materials;
- three onsite trainings and three virtual seminars facilitated by FrameWorks staff;
- an online social learning platform 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 was designed to provide participants with substantive opportunities to reassess their communications practices and to incorporate empirically vetted recommendations for improving their practices.

## **EVALUATION OF IMPACT**

This evaluation brief reports on an internal assessment of the effectiveness of the training and its impact on the practices of the participants. The brief begins with a situation analysis drawn from FrameWorks' existing research base on how the public thinks about immigration reform, and a complementary analysis of how the participating organizations were framing issues in their existing organizational messaging. After describing the content of the Study Circle curriculum, this brief moves into findings related to impact.

To prepare this assessment, 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 electronically. Second, we conducted follow-up telephone interviews with participants whose surveys indicated that they had substantially modified their communications practices based on the FrameWorks Study Circle. In the follow-up interviews, we asked participants to provide greater insight into the value of the training for them, the components they perceived as effective (or less so), the areas where they felt the training could have been deepened or strengthened, and how they had applied the information and skills they acquired through the training.

Of the 15 participants, eight answered the emailed survey (anonymously) and three were asked to participate in a 15- to 20-minute follow-up interview.

The data from this evaluation were mostly qualitative in nature. Open-ended survey and interview responses were coded across thematic categories, organized to highlight the major issues identified by respondents, and analyzed to reveal common threads. Quantitative indicators are integrated throughout this brief to support or summarize the primarily qualitative analysis.

## **THE COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE**

FrameWorks' research on immigration has revealed some significant communications challenges embedded in the public discourse on immigration. Dominant ways of thinking and talking about immigration that are entrenched in public discourse 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 cognitively toggle between fear of, and admiration for, immigrants. As a result, advocates' and experts' well-intentioned narratives about immigrants' economic and social value to the nation are quickly overtaken in the media and in public thinking. Invoking cultural models of "good" immigrants also brings with it models of "bad" immigrants – those who enter the country illegally. Thus, a narrative about economic benefits to America is easily translated into one about an economic loss to Americans: The story becomes about immigrants who steal jobs from Americans, as well as about a government that is too inept or insensitive to use its police powers to do anything about it.

Without knowing the existing contours of public thinking and how unproductive cultural models are activated, policy experts and advocates often inadvertently trigger them in their public education and messaging efforts. To begin the process of helping influential community voices to navigate public thinking more effectively, FrameWorks reviewed the communications materials in use by Study Circle participants, with an eye toward identifying how and when the messages fell into communication "traps." Traps are common – and eminently plausible – ways of framing an issue that, upon investigation, fail to achieve the desired effect, or even turn out to do more harm than good. Traps are often habits of a field and, as such, can be difficult to notice and even harder to avoid. Once the field's traps are identified, they provide the basis for concrete recommendations about how to avoid those triggers and improve the impact of messaging.

In the case of the Study Circles in Los Angeles' immigration advocacy community, FrameWorks' materials review identified several principal challenges that informed the development of an intense and focused reframing curriculum.

- First, participants tended to use a "crisis" frame 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. Instead of achieving the desired effect, 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.

FrameWorks' research suggests that an overtly partisan or highly rhetorical tone shuts off public consideration of the message, as they quickly dismiss the communication as mere "politics as usual."

- 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.
- "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
- Fourth, participants often couched their discourse in terms of disparities between groups. FrameWorks' research suggests that this way of framing inequity elicits zero-sum thinking 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 tension suggested the need for reframing the issue of government so that participants could introduce it into communications in ways that would not derail the conversation about immigration reform.

### **The Reframing Solution**

As participants built the ability to discern when messages were headed toward a predictable communication trap, they became eager to learn about more productive alternatives. The learning activities in both Study Circles focused largely on helping participants understand how frame elements could be marshaled to address these issues. Participants were encouraged to use these frame elements to redesign their own messaging and, in doing so, to reframe the public conversation in Los Angeles.

Participants in the Study Circle met with FrameWorks Institute staff: in person, virtually in webinars, and 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. As part of those sessions, participants were offered strategies to address common communications challenges, as well as a greater explanation about the science of cognition and communications that undergirds the development of FrameWorks’ research methods. FrameWorks’ messaging template begins with a set of empirically validated values, which are used in messaging to orient the conversation toward why the issue matters, and is then elaborated through explanatory metaphors which clarify key concepts related to the issue. Each session of the Study Circle offered participants a chance to explore the research supporting one or more recommended frame elements, and then practice integrating the elements into their messaging materials.

Participants learned that the values of *Prosperity* and *Fairness Between Places* are effective in orienting public discourse on immigration reform. *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 reorient 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.

### **An 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 the 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. The passage of SB 1070, in addition to other things, divides families, condones and institutionalizes racial profiling and discourages crime reporting. There is a much better way to address immigration, and solutions to this issue are being overlooked in favor of these ill-suited measures.

Participants also learned that these values work best when they are used in conjunction with an explanatory metaphor. Explanatory metaphors are simple, concrete and memorable ways of reframing an abstract concept through analogy. In this way, an explanatory metaphor can restructure how the public thinks and talks about an issue, and can elevate the public discourse by inviting the public into the ways of thinking that those who are highly familiar with an issue take for granted. FrameWorks’ research has found that the simplifying model *The Infrastructure We Never Built* works well to explain why immigration reform is necessary, and what its primary targets should be. 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.

### **An Effective Combination of Prosperity and Infrastructure Elements**

Representing one-fifth of all low-wage workers in the United States, undocumented immigrants are a 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 here legally, and why don’t those already 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 abilities 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 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.

“I thought I would be learning overall messaging but didn't realize how extensive the information would be!”

—Study Circle Participant

### Shifts in Communications Practices: Selected Examples

The FrameWorks Institute’s applied trainings are designed to ensure that participants 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 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 they have been able to integrate the key findings into their work.

“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

**CAIR-LA.** The Council on American-Islamic Relations is the largest Islamic civil liberties group in the United States, and its office in Los Angeles works to promote issues related to Muslim-Americans in the LA 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 leading to punitive actions against Muslim-Americans. The organization found enthusiastic support from their younger members to move in this direction, but has been 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 what they learned in the Study Circle to reframe immigration in a way that would garner support for this issue from their membership as a whole, integrating it into existing communication vehicles such as letters to members and regular updates on legislative actions.*

*“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 IKoustaf, CAIR-LA

**Californians Together.** Californians Together is a coalition of organizations from the civil rights and education fields that mobilizes for immigrant education. At the time of the Study Circle, they were in the fifth year of a major, multi-year, statewide campaign for a *Seal of Bi-Literacy* program. The program creates a pathway for dual-language students – whether native-born or immigrant – to gain recognition for achieving fluency in two or more languages at the end of their high school career.

Californians Together had achieved great success through its campaign at the school district level. Thirty-three school districts have integrated the program and 24 districts are currently considering adoption. They had garnered the support of key stakeholders, having sought and won the support of the California School Board Association, the Association of California School Administrators and the California Federation of Teachers. However, they needed help in communicating the benefits of this program to the larger public, and expanding the program into additional school districts. The organization saw that FrameWorks’ recommendation of appealing to broadly held, empirically tested values was an important shift to make in their communications practice.

*“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 Bi-Literacy 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 seeks 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 delineates 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

### **Participant Reactions and Assessments**

At the end of the six-month, intensive engagement with the Study Circle participants, FrameWorks’ evaluation team invited participants to talk about the broader impact that being a part of this kind of learning community has had on them and on their institutions. The feedback was largely positive. For instance, 100 percent of participants indicated that, as a result of the training, they think fundamentally differently about the media, messaging and communications. In open-ended questions, participants pointed to concrete applications of the theory, research and recommendations of Strategic Frame Analysis:

*“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.'* "

## **IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

As part of the final Study Circle session, participants articulated their desired next steps toward enhancing their communications expertise. In addition, as part of the Institute's evaluation work, FrameWorks asked them to identify potential barriers to taking full advantage of the research they were exposed to during the Study Circle. Their responses illuminate potential opportunities to continue building the communications capacity of advocates for meaningful and effective immigration policies and programs.

**Help Policy Experts and Advocates Address the Institutional Barriers of Adopting New Frames.** A routine challenge for Study Circle graduates is moving their newly acquired expertise into the organizations they represent. They may be eager to share their newly acquired understanding of framing, but, for various reasons, they may not find supportive audiences when they return to those institutions. 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 in 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 spokespeople 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."*

The implication for the immigration Study Circle's field of practice is the need to engage more colleagues in the study of strategic framing, if the innovations are to be sustained. The implication for the design of future FrameWorks training is a need to attend to the concern of organizational change in the curriculum. Strategies may include building-in learning experiences that more fully equip participants to share their new knowledge, skills and dispositions with key allies in their organizations, or encouraging organizations to send pairs of representatives to trainings.

**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. Their context and concerns differed in important ways from those of the advocacy networks. For instance, in FrameWorks' training experience, researchers and scientists have sometimes resisted the idea that it is necessary to frame their findings at all — confusing the strategic framing approach with “spin” or audience manipulation. 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.”* As FrameWorks continues to engage academics in the science of effective communication, a continuing challenge will be to “frame framing” in such a way that its grounding in the cognitive and social sciences is more transparent, and that its appropriate application to research is more readily understood.

**Help Policy Experts and Advocates Frame Immigration in the Context of the Economy.** Several of the participants wanted to understand the connections between immigration and taxes. The lingering troubles of the American economy have allowed for the heightening of a political rhetoric that paints a picture of exceptionally limited public resources. In this political environment, funding for many advocacy organizations, and the issues they advocate for, is threatened. FrameWorks has significant research on how the public thinks about government more broadly, and about budgets and taxes in particular, and has developed and tested metaphors and other frame elements that allow for a range of policy issues to be forwarded in the context of discourse on budgets and taxes. The Institute routinely advises advocates that “Budgets & Taxes is your second issue” — meaning that every effective advocate needs to possess the ability to articulate a case for why a specific issue-related program deserves a place in the list of collective priorities represented in public budgets. Strategies for framing government, budgets and taxes were incorporated into the Study Circle, but participant feedback suggests that this set of framing tools may have deserved greater emphasis.

**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 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 their skills in especially challenging framing topics, such as social math and context. *“[For me], simplifying models, causal 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.”*