The 17th annual Students and Alumni of Color Symposium was held at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University November 10 and 11, 2012. Panelists, alumni, and current students gathered around the theme *(Re)Balancing the Scales: Supporting Economic Mobility in Unequal Times*. This publication captures the policy discussions and mentoring opportunities that are at the heart of the SAOC tradition. In the following pages you will find four policy briefs -- one on each of the panel discussions on topics ranging from voter disenfranchisement to access to finance, from the role of education to holistic strategies for revitalizing communities. Later pages include stories from the keynote speaker, Texas State Representative Eric Johnson, MPA/JD ‘03, this year’s Edward P. Bullard Award winner Richard Roper, MPA ‘71, as well as spotlights on mentoring and the World Cafe.
President Obama’s reelection succeeded on the strength of one of the most diverse electorates in U.S. history. People of color, women, and young voters made up the greatest share of the voting population than ever before. Remarkably, they did so in the face of increasingly restrictive voting laws. Reversing the historical trend of increasing accessibility to vote, Republican lawmakers across the country sought to restrict the vote by passing complex voter-identification laws, making it more difficult to register to vote, and by restricting opportunities for early voting. In all, 19 states enacted voting laws that disproportionately hindered the ability of students and communities of color to participate in the election.

Citzens, organizations, and legislators rose up across the country to fight these restrictive laws and overturned or reduced the most harmful effects of many of the laws. SAOC panelists discussed the battles they waged in the courts, on the ground, and in the statehouse to restore citizens’ right to vote.

In the Courts

Ms. Perez, Senior Counsel in the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center for Justice, outlined the steps legislatures have taken, which ultimately restrict the right of poor citizens and citizens of color to vote. Since the 2008 election, she noted that legislatures across the country have attempted to restrict the right to vote by enacting voter identification laws that only selectively recognize some forms of ID; proof of citizenship laws; laws restricting the opportunity to vote; and laws restricting early voting. These laws disproportionately restrict more than 10% of the population: people of color, students, and the elderly are all groups that disproportionately lack driver’s licenses or state ID cards.

She also reviewed the strong pushback from citizens, civil rights groups, and the Department of Justice. The Brennan Center and several other civil rights groups litigated to prevent legislatures from disenfranchising voters. In many cases, after holding the laws up to the Constitution, courts were forced to agree that the laws were unconstitutional or that they could not be implemented in 2012. In cases where laws were upheld, many of the most harmful aspects were effectively blunted. Perhaps most importantly, in South Carolina v. Holder, The Brennan Center, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, and the League of Women Voters, were able to argue for a “reasonable impediment” exception against South Carolina’s voter ID law. In codifying the exception, the D.C. District court set a precedent to help blunt similar voter ID laws in the future.

In the Texas State Capitol

Eric Johnson, Texas State Representative for District 100, reviewed political strategies to resist restrictive voting laws in the face of daunting odds. With the Texas legislature dominated by a Republican supermajority determined to restrict access to voting, the Texas democratic caucus faced a terrible dilemma: water down the legislation such that it might pass constitutional muster, or vote to pass a law so draconian that it would necessarily fail judicial review. Shrewdly, the Democrats decided to present every sensible amendment to the bill. Although each and every proposal was voted down on the floor of the legislature, Democrats were able to create a record of Republican lawmakers flatly rejecting constitutional alternatives to the legislation. In rejecting the law, the D.C. District Court noted that the legislature tabled or defeated several amendments that would have made the Texas law “a much closer case.”

Going Forward

Although progressive politicians and organizations were able to fight many of the most onerous restrictive voting laws, panelists noted that concrete steps still remain to ensure increasing voter participation in communities of color and other historically underrepresented communities.

- National Voter Registration

Ms. Perez and Ms. Garcia both believed that our voter registration system can and should be modernized. Specifically, an electronic National Voter Registration System could be maintained without unduly burdening any Federal agency. In proposing such a system, Ms. Perez envisioned shifting the burden of registration from citizens onto the government: where citizens interact with the government, either to obtain an ID or register a vehicle, it would be relatively easy to concurrently register them to vote.

- New Messaging

In an effort to reach a broader audience, Rep. Johnson proposed changing the messaging surrounding voter participation. Instead of focusing on the groups disproportionately harmed by restrictive voting laws, he suggested appealing to more conservative voters. First, Rep. Johnson submitted ideas that would appeal to libertarian ideals; namely that restrictive legislation represents an invasion of privacy by an overly intrusive government. Instead, citizens should be free to vote without having to go through bureaucratic loopholes. To compensate, it would be possible to increase the punishment for voter fraud on the back end for the handful of people who do intentionally defraud election laws. Second, Rep. Johnson proposed focusing on the American ideal of universal enfranchisement instead of merely on those communities that have been disenfranchised.
Increasing Access to Opportunity through Education, Vocational Training, and Employment Creation

Panelists: Leo Chyi MPA ’06, Martin Johnson, Richard Roper MPA ’71, Karen Thomson MPA ’93

By Nicolas Zarazua MPA ’14, advised by Karen Thomson

Panelists discussed the important role of education as a key contributor to economic mobility, particularly among communities of color. Three key takeaways from the panel include:

- **Nationally recognized, local initiatives are difficult to replicate, but we can still learn from their work**

  Successful programs like the Harlem Children’s Zone are unlikely to be replicated exactly in another community without significant financial investment and strong leadership. However, even without these preconditions, some aspects of these programs can be initiated in different communities across the country. For example, integrating parent education and mental health services with services already being provided in schools can be effective in creating more cohesive communities. These initiatives would benefit from strong leaders, but the presence of such a leader is not necessary. Although finding charismatic leaders like Geoffrey Canada is difficult, this only underscores the importance of developing young leaders interested in working with students and communities.

- **The replication of successful programs must avoid the “tyranny of scale”**

  As panelist Martin Johnson put it, “These are complex communities we’re in – our solutions don’t have to be simple.” Certain programs in one community may be successful in addressing local issues, but it does not necessarily follow that implementing the exact same program in another community would produce results. Each community has different strengths it can use to address its own issues.

- **Creating partnerships with the private sector in workforce development can lead to more job opportunities**

  Workforce development is necessary to promote economic growth. Creating linkages between alternative schools and the private sector can help establish key education and job pipelines for students, providing a skilled labor force for local businesses. Alternative schools focusing on traditional academic subjects, while also emphasizing technical and administrative skills, would help develop students who are ready to contribute in the workplace. The private sector, by offering internship and job shadowing opportunities to students, can help ease the pathway to employment and benefit from a rich pool of skilled job applicants.

Place Based Initiatives

Many low income communities or communities of color suffer from serious under investment. Given the mobility of capital, many communities lack employment opportunities; this has led public, nonprofit, and private organizations to support initiatives that seek to improve the quality of life in specific communities.

A place based project is a policy or set of policies that seeks to strengthen the livability or conditions of a specific geographic location. The two most common “place based strategies” focus on the physical infrastructure of a community through affordable housing or public transportation, or emphasize the needs of the people within a community. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Often place based initiatives are targeted around small business development, affordable housing, or expanded educational opportunities.

How Organizations Can Best Support Initiatives that Target Specific Communities

- **Gentrification:** Some community based organizations that focus on improving the physical environment of a neighborhood may inadvertently gentrify the community. Gentrification does not necessarily need to lead to dislocation. Dislocation can be prevented by providing enough affordable housing even after a neighborhood becomes highly desirable for young professionals.

- **Collaboration:** City governments and community organizations must be careful to collaborate closely with local residents. City services are more effective if residents do not view the city as simply providing a service, but instead partner with city officials in crafting programs that will impact their community.

- **Innovative funding:** Federal funding will continue to diminish, forcing community based organizations and city governments to be more innovative in their programs and partnerships. Public-private partnerships will become more desirable in a constrained fiscal environment. Miami-Dade County, for example, is developing interest in creating affordable housing by selective application of tax incentives.

- **Coordination and clear goals:** For maximum effectiveness, community organizations should have clear measurable goals, and cultivate strong working relationships with city government and like-minded organizations. This can ensure stable funding sources for the organization, and ensure that city community development efforts are well-coordinated. This means that service providers at different levels (social services, educational programs, job training or other economic support programs) should all be aware of related efforts. Coordinated service delivery can also reduce duplication and costs.

- **Asset identification:** In attempting to revitalize a community, stakeholders should know what the assets of a location are. This may include conducting a market analysis to investigate what types of businesses are most likely to be attracted to a community based on its characteristics. Cities should view economic development from a regional perspective. This can prevent the tendency of cities to compete with each other to attract businesses by offering tax incentives.
Access to finance is the result of a complex interplay of various financial intermediaries, a sound regulatory framework and an appropriate financial infrastructure. In much of the developing world today, this delicate balance is often not easily attained. Tools such as microfinance, touted for increasing low-income individuals’ access to finance, have not consistently met expectations. To advance financial inclusion in a responsible and efficient manner, policymakers should consider the following objectives:

- **Enhance Financial Literacy**

  Enhancing financial literacy alongside financial access should be a key priority for public as well as private financial institutions around the globe. Educating low income individuals about different financial tools and mechanisms in place would allow them to better cushion their incomes in times of need, as well as preclude the problem of financial entrapment rather than financial empowerment. The subprime crisis in the US highlights the importance of financial education. Subprime mortgage-holders and high microfinance default rates represent forms of financial entrapment in the US and around the world.

  To improve financial literacy, mobile phones can deliver "rules of thumb" training, rather than traditional in depth curricula that may be less effective. Development agencies should research how “rule of thumb” training can help improve financial decisions of the world’s poor.

- **Emphasize Financial Usage**

  The focus of financial inclusion needs to shift from financial access to financial usage, a more holistic measure of the impact of financial services. Judging the efficacy of financial programs and microfinance institutions solely on total number of active borrowers, loan portfolios or profitability indicators can create perverse incentives and result in over-indebtedness of borrowers.

  Financial institutions can measure usage through branchless banking, as financial transactions are linked to mobile usage. Financial usage is more challenging to quantify, as it is a welfare implication measure. Measures of financial usage on a monthly basis provide a basis to assess financial inclusion programs on metrics other than profitability and loan dispersions.

- **Encourage Branchless Banking Mechanisms**

  Major constraints to financial access arise from the high costs associated with using financial products. To counter this, physical access can be improved using new technology solutions such as branchless banking or mobile banking to help expand geographical outreach and overcome low literacy levels. While the usual ‘brick and mortar’ branches carry with them huge capital and operational costs, employing branchless banking as a payment platform can accelerate the flow of financial services through the use of service centers, kiosks at third party locations and branchless banking agents.

  Almost three-quarters of individuals in the developing world do not have access to a bank account, though nearly half do have access to mobile phones. The key policy challenge would be to link up these two measures in the coming years to reduce long-term costs of providing finance to low income individuals and make it easier to connect to the formal sector.

- **Allow for Product Flexibility**

  Formal access varies among rural and urban areas, between men and women, income levels, as well as along education and employment sectors, yet interest in financial services is virtually identical. The challenge is to translate financial interest into formal access by allowing for product flexibility which can address a wide heterogeneity of borrowers.

  Financial and development institutions’ product designs must allow for heterogeneity to enhance uptake of financial services and to allow first time users to develop trust in the formal system. There is a growing trend towards increasing the diversity of products being offered, which has led to a decline in group loans, increased individual lending and uptake of savings mechanisms. Ensuring that financial products meet people’s actual needs will reduce any long term negative impacts on households often associated with increased financial usage.
Eric Johnson, MPA/JD ’03 and Texas State Representative from District 100 in Dallas, gave the keynote address during the 17th annual SAOC symposium. After graduating from Harvard University in 1998, Rep. Johnson returned to Dallas and accepted a position as Legislative Assistant to State Representative Yvonne Davis. Rep. Johnson then earned a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania and an MPA with a focus on education policy and international affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School. Today, Rep. Johnson owns and operates the Law Offices of Eric L. Johnson, P.C., and is a Democrat in the Texas state legislature. A freshman Democrat in a legislature dominated by a Republican supermajority, Rep. Johnson spoke to SAOC participants about threats to democracy taking place across a number of states, and specifically about his role in the Texas state legislature fighting restrictive voter identification legislation.

Rep. Johnson discussed the inaccuracy of the rhetoric surrounding the voter fraud “epidemic” in the US, and explained that identification requirements disproportionately affect students, elderly, black, Latino, and low income voters. If universal suffrage is a goal of the political system, he suggested enhancing participation by making election day a national holiday, holding elections on weekends, or making voter registration automatic upon turning 18.

To help genuinely enhance participation in the US, Rep. Johnson urged SAOC participants to apply their WWS skills at the state level, by pushing back attempts to restrict access to the ballot box.

The Edward P. Bullard Award is given annually to a Woodrow Wilson School alumnus who has served as an exemplary mentor to WWS students or students in his/her community and is thus an inspiration to students of color at the Woodrow Wilson School. Ed Bullard served as the catalyst for the first Students and Alumni of Color Symposium seventeen years ago, and the award honors his legacy.

Richard Roper, MPA ’71 is the tenth recipient of the Edward P. Bullard Award. Mr. Roper has had a long and influential career that has so far spanned New Jersey state government, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the Carter administration, and various capacities as a lecturer and administrator at the Woodrow Wilson School. Ann Corwin presented the Bullard Award to Mr. Roper and in her remarks she said, “I know no one who knows more about New Jersey state, local, and regional politics than Richard.”

Today Mr. Roper remains active as a consultant for various organizations, and a board member for five non-profit and government bodies: Newark’s Brick City Development Corporation; the Fund for New Jersey; the New Jersey Supreme Court’s Advisory Committee on Judicial Conduct; the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice; and La Casa de don Pedro, a community development corporation in Newark. He has served on the transition staff for the Mayors of Camden, NJ; Philadelphia, PA; Newark, NJ; and Trenton, NJ. He has also been a participant on the transition committees for the last few Democratic Governors of New Jersey.

The third and fifth Bullard Award winners, Julius Coles, MPA ’66 and Vivien Li, MPA-URP ’83, were also in attendance for the 2012 SAOC Symposium.
Mentoring

Mentorship, a friendship focused on the sharing of knowledge and information from one experienced person to another, is at the core of the SAOC mission. Opportunities for networking and mentorship between WWS alumni and current graduate students were interspersed throughout the symposium and included a Prospect House social hour and dinner reception.

World Cafe

For the second year, SAOC attendees participated in a World Cafe, a conversational format pioneered in 1995 by Juanita Brown and other academic and business leaders in California. This year participants gathered in small groups to discuss personal reflections on thought-provoking questions about race, inequality, and the role and responsibility of government in the United States.

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Stay tuned for information about the next SAOC Symposium, coming in Spring 2014!