

Immigration Conference Spurs Debate

February 28-31, 2009

Boca Raton Florida: A conference on *A Nation of Immigrants: American Democracy and Civics Education* sponsored by the Jack Miller Forum at Florida Atlantic University and the National Endowment for the Humanities focused the attention of 45 professors from as many universities and colleges on the pressing need for colleges and universities to offer programs that provide immigrants the understanding and knowledge they need to be informed citizens. Rear Admiral Mike Ratliff, president of the Jack Miller Center in Philadelphia, welcomed the visiting educators by saying

“immigrants are highly motivated. They want to learn about American institutions and our tradition of freedom reaching back to our Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Our colleges and universities must take the lead in offering immigrants courses and workshops to prepare them for citizenship. Equally important, they must prepare high school and elementary school teachers to carry this education into their classrooms.”

Benjamin Barber delivered the keynote Wednesday evening in which he argued “Citizens are made over time and our founders knew that well. Without citizens who understand the difference between responsibilities and rights, no democratic system can survive. We all know what our rights are, but very few people have a sense of how our rights are coupled to our responsibilities as citizens.”

Arguing that the older ‘model of education based citizens is being changed in ways we do not yet appreciate as a result of privatization, commercialization, and globalization or the growth of interdependence,’ Barber argued that educating immigrants is a “two way street” in which the immigrants learn about America and Americans can learn about the world.

Over the subsequent three days scholars explored every dimension of civic education. From the first paper, in which Yale University’s Keith Wrightson described “the discourse in liberty” with which early British immigrants to North America were familiar, to University of Kansas professor Jonathan Clark’s concluding call for a reinvention of political science and our understanding of the American democratic tradition, the conference offered a rich array of insights and resources. Many conference participants, including Professor Tim Linz of the host campus, Florida Atlantic University, described new initiatives and efforts to redesign their curriculum to make it more relevant and effective. Sessions on the role of experiential education and the importance of introducing new technologies into civic education suggested the range of classroom resources that can be integrated into 21st century civic education. Reaching beyond formal educational institutions, Dr. Catherine Wilson of Villanova University,

described programs focused on the unique needs of immigrants that are being offered by non-profit community institutions.

Virtually everyone agreed on the political, social, and historic importance of civic education, but there was energetic disagreement on what form it should take. This is exactly the kind of earnest conversation that is necessary to address these difficult historical and political questions. The excitement of the participants is an indication the need to continue the dialogue.

Charles Kesler, editor of *The Claremont Review of Books*, and Boston College professor, Peter Skerry, led a spirited discussion of Samuel Huntington's formulation of an "American creed." Mr. Jack Miller's defense of essential "founding principles" based on the "unalienable rights" in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, won general agreement. Benjamin Barber thought it better to describe this as the "American faith," rather than a creed, and there was debate about any effort to extend the essentials of an American creed (or faith) to include sectarian or ethnic values.

All agreed on the importance of focusing attention on this educational priority. Rutgers's Gordon Schochet congratulated the Jack Miller Center and Florida Atlantic University for "valiantly and I hope not vainly striving to sustain that spirit of mutual respect in which vigorous dissent and real learning can take place." Jonathan Clark reflected the participants' positive attitude when he said: "If there was anyone in doubt about the robustness of American civic virtue they need only meet these two remarkable philanthropists, Jack and Goldie Miller."