Event Summary: DREAMers Panel  
February 21, 2013

On Thursday, February 21, 2013, the Trans-Border Institute (TBI) hosted an inter-disciplinary panel to discuss the effects of the recently passed executive order, known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), as well as young people’s experience as they go from “undocumented” to having access to driver’s licenses, work permits, and social security numbers. The panel discussed the possibility and need for comprehensive immigration reform, including the passage of the long awaited DREAM act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors). The panel discussion was mediated by Veronica Barba, executive director of the Immigration Justice Project.

The discussion began with Ginger Jacobs, a partner at Jacobs & Schlesinger here in San Diego, who gave a legal explanation of DACA, as well information on the development of the DREAM Act over the past 12 years. She explained who is eligible for the program, how to apply, and what benefits applicants receive if approved. Jacobs stressed that although DACA is an important and exciting step towards immigration reform, there is a serious need for more comprehensive reform as well as a program that provides a path to citizenship for DREAMers.

After the explanation and clarification of DACA, the panel was joined by three DREAMers-Ismael Soto, José Mondragón, and Karen Arzate. Each discussed their experience growing up “undocumented” in the United States, living in fear of deportation to a country they did not know, their struggle to find work, and their application processes for colleges. Soto, Mondragón, and Arzate, all came to the United States as children, attended public high school in the States, and have graduated or in the process of graduating from institutes of higher education. All three plan to pursue graduate degrees. For these DREAMers, DACA is relief from fear of deportation and a road to begin to work legally (with a social security card), as well as the ability to apply for financial aid to pursue further education.

The panel then shifted to look at the policy and business perspective of the DREAM Act. The director of the Trans-Border Institute, David Shirk, discussed the history of immigration policy, and reform, and the important immigration issues that are being discussed in Washington, D.C. today. He argued a need to move away from securing an already increasingly militarized border, and rather to start looking at streamlining the immigration system within the United States. He also emphasized a need to focus on raising the standard of living in Mexico, which could decrease the need for Mexicans to migrate across the border. Next, Ruben Barrales, former president of the San Diego Regional Chamber
of Commerce, discussed the issue of labor in the United States and how, in the next ten years, labor will be an even more important issue for the U.S. economy. He stressed a need for a comprehensive immigration reform that addressed this issue.

Finally, the panel discussed the community’s perspective on DACA and on broader immigration reform. Reyes Quezada, a professor at the School of Leadership and Educational Science at the University of San Diego, opened the conversation by discussing the eligibility of DREAMers to access the education system and the challenges they face in doing so. He called for teachers and educational leaders to motivate young migrant students, and to help change their attitude about what is or is not possible for them as “undocumented” youths. Next, Christian Ramirez, Humans Rights director at Alliance San Diego, discussed the paradigm shift in the community with respect to immigration over the last few decades in San Diego. He urged for continued support of the DREAMers, specifically calling on universities to speak out and support the furthering of students’ educations. The final panelist, Olivia Ruiz, senior analyst of migration and immigration policy at TBI and a professor of anthropology at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, highlighted a shift that has taken place in the Mexican perspective toward DACA. According to Ruiz, in the past, many Mexicans have been unsupportive of their fellow Mexican nationals who migrated to the United States, yet attitudes are changing on the topic, both in Mexico and the United States. Ruiz explained this new trans-national perspective in Mexico, adding that having educated and politically charged youth in both countries could lead to improved relations between the two.

The panel came to close with a short question and answer session, discussions which seemed to indicate that the general feeling among panelists and audience members is that comprehensive immigration reform would be beneficial not only to potential DREAMers, but to the U.S. and Mexican economies and societies. Many on the panel urged those present to write to Congress, and to educational and community leaders, to show their support for immigration reform.