



Building a Regional Cluster for Cultural Change in Higher Education: The Imagining America SoCal Cluster

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By Celestina Castillo, 2019-2020 Lead Organizer for SoCal Cluster

What is regional cluster organizing?

Regional cluster organizing brings together faculty, students, staff, and community partners from various academic institutions/campuses who are interested in developing relationships and building strategies that can lead to policy and culture change at their institutions and, ideally, in higher education at large. Shifts in institutional culture occur through relationship building, collective learning and action, and intentional reflection within and across academic institutions. Through cluster organizing faculty, students, staff, and community partners work collaboratively to make social, cultural, and policy changes both in the academy and in communities.

Why take this type of an approach to creating change?

The primary goal of regional cluster organizing is to connect individuals, both within and across campuses, to build power to move the cultures of our institutions to a place that truly values the work of community-based teaching, learning, and scholarship.

This type of approach is important because culture change cannot be done alone by any one person at any campus and working with colleagues from our own campuses, along with others from other campuses, helps develop robust strategies for creating changes across our campuses. Additionally, collaborations with other campuses are often valued by academic institutions. It is often seen as more credible and powerful when faculty, students, and staff from various campuses come together with a shared vision, rather than a group from just one institution.

Connecting across institutions and community spaces sometimes also gives you the courage, strength, and motivation to connect with the people you've work alongside every day for years. It creates a space to reflect and imagine, to envision a world in which the academic institutions we work within truly embrace the principles of community, collaboration, and collective scholarship. In this world, those institutions equally value and respect a range of knowledges that come from both within and outside of the academy, and faculty and students who value collaborative partnerships for learning and scholarship that draw from both the academy and communities outside the academy are valued and supported. This support extends to the point where institutions acknowledge that the land they are established and built upon was gained at the expense of Indigenous peoples, via wealth accumulated through colonization and slavery and expanded upon over generations through the disenfranchising of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, and commit to addressing historical and social injustices.

SoCal Cluster: An Exemplar

It is within the above envisioning that the Imagining America Southern California (SoCal) Cluster was created. We began the work of regional organizing in 2015 and have continued to develop as a cluster since then, including through a number of transitions from one lead organizer to another, core members moving from one institution or role to another, and most recently the closure of so many campuses and move to remote learning due to the pandemic. The ability to weather these transitions is emblematic of the value of the cluster to its membership. We have continued to develop our relationships and push ourselves individually and collectively to take intentional and strategic actions to build the world and academic institutions we want – ones that truly acknowledge and value community. We know this is a long-term vision and goal built upon generations of work, ancestors, and antecedents, but ultimately it is where we draw our energy from and what motivates us.

Values and Frameworks

The overarching values of the cluster include building community, creating culture change in our academic institutions, partnership with community-based organizations, and a belief that we can create cultural change through organizing stakeholders who care about culture change. These stakeholders are students, faculty, administrators, and community partners connected to our institutions, who believe in reimagining the institution and are willing to engage power at various levels in order to make changes in the culture, policies, and procedure of our academies, as well as in the broader community. Changing the culture and policies of the institutions impacts off-campus communities as well. As students engage in community-based



learning and research and as they later become professionals, they carry with them not only the learning they acquired in the academy, but also the principles and practices of community-based work, through their educational experiences with faculty, administrators, staff, their peers, and community partners.

Building a cluster also requires a commitment to critical reflection and reciprocity among members. We committed to reflecting on what drew us to the work of teaching, working in higher education, or pursuing an education that allows us to contribute to social change through collaborative community-based learning and participatory action research. Understanding our own stories and engaging in dialogue about our stories is critical in grounding ourselves in why we do the work and to build community and respect for one another.

Organizing Principles and Practices

In her book, *Transformative Civic Engagement through Community Organizing*, Maria Avila, the first organizer and ongoing member of the SoCal Cluster, goes into depth on the use, purpose, and method of one-to-one conversations. It is through these one-to-one conversations that regional cluster organizing begins and where we are each able to find colleagues within our institutions with whom to collaborate on the creation of institutional teams. The SoCal Cluster began with Maria reaching out to individuals she had worked with at various academic institutions in Southern California, who she knew were interested in organizing across institutions in order to change each of their individual institutions and ideally the culture of higher education. The work of creating a cluster is relational and process heavy. It requires hours of conversations, patience with process, and the ability to identify the common interests that draw people together.

In order to develop the cluster, one person must commit to being the lead organizer. Initially, Maria took on the lead organizer role. The lead organizer identifies a core of other leaders from various institutions in a region, builds the leadership of this core of leaders, and identifies opportunities for this core of leaders to continue to deepen their commitment to and ownership of the cluster. The shared ownership of the cluster is crucial to its long-term sustainability and its relationship to the national Imagining America organization. In addition to deepening the sense of ownership for existing cluster members, it is important for each member to identify new members, or leaders, for the cluster from their institutional and community partners.

The lead organizer also meets regularly with cluster members, individually (one-to-ones) and as a group (in cluster meetings), to identify and develop strategies for the collective work of the cluster. The lead organizer, along with all the cluster members, also identifies potential new leaders. The organizer maintains regular communications with cluster members in order to sustain the cohesion and growth of the group, such as scheduling regular meetings (usually every two months during the academic year and once or twice in the summer), developing collaborative meeting agendas with core members, ensuring meeting notes are generated and shared, and arranging all meeting logistics in partnership with cluster leadership from various campuses.

Each cluster meeting is held at a different “host institution” within the cluster and is coordinated by one of the core cluster members at that institution. The lead organizer and the core cluster member from the host institution usually handle all logistics for the meeting (including food and parking), as well as inviting any interested colleagues from the host institution. Meetings have often served as a way to highlight the community-engaged work of the host institution and to attract new members to the cluster. Students, faculty, and/or staff from the hosting campus would often present their community-based projects. Teams of students, faculty and community partners often provided these presentations. Over time we realized that supporting both graduate and undergraduate students doing community-based learning and research is important to all of us. The cluster meetings then also became a practice space for undergraduate and graduate students to share their work, to receive feedback and questions, and to meet faculty and students from various institutions that are committed to community-based learning and scholarship. The meetings eventually became a space for all of us to practice before presentations at the Imagining America National Gatherings. It is also important to note that individual and campus teams often traveled over an hour to attend meetings, which is another testament to the investment that members made to the cluster.

Outcomes

The values and outcomes of the cluster are determined collectively. At the beginning, the cluster served as a network and a professional development space founded on the trust each of the core members had in the lead organizer and each other. It began with honest conversations about what mattered to each of us and why we chose to work in higher education. Once we felt a sense of common ground, the goal of changing the culture of our institutions became clear. This meant creating spaces for students, faculty, and community partners who believed that their purpose within and in relationship to these institutions of higher education was not only for themselves, but also for their communities – a way to address historical injustices regardless of the academic discipline they were anchored in or any specific area of research. Over time it also became a mentoring and intellectual peer exchange space for faculty and students. In the future, additional outcomes may be added, as the group grows and evolves.

Transitions and Future Directions

At this time, we are in the midst of a pandemic and all working remotely, not gathering in-person in order to maintain our health, but also feeling isolated and disconnected, an issue we were actually trying to address through the creation of the cluster. When the pandemic hit, we moved to virtual meeting spaces, yet we have maintained the relationships and values of our cluster. Prior to the pandemic, we had also discussed the possibility of a regional mini-conference that could potentially lead to more regional collaborative work and action. We will likely revisit this possibility once we are able to meet in-person and on our campuses. Additionally, as this pandemic continues and we enter a new academic year, we have looked to each other to figure out how to maintain community-engaged teaching, research, and scholarship. We have committed to ongoing reflection, both individually and collectively, on how we have been able to continue, shift, and pivot to teaching and learning remotely, with community partners and cluster members.

Acknowledgements

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References

Avila, M. (2018). *Transformative Civic Engagement Through Community Organizing*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.