

The Alston/Bannerman Fellowship Program

*honoring and sustaining
long-time organizers of color
working for racial, social,
economic and environmental justice*



National Gathering of Alston/Bannerman Fellows, April 2004

PHOTOS BY DAVID BACON

The Alston/Bannerman Fellowship Program convened a gathering of Fellows on April 22-25, 2004. The 106 Fellows who participated are long-time organizers of color from 28 states plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and El Salvador. They are from cities, rural communities and reservations. Their organizing work spans decades—from the 1940s to the present, and movements—including civil rights, labor, immigrant rights, Native sovereignty and environmental justice. The Fellows' diversity and experience made this an exceptional opportunity for dialogue about movement building.

The convening was made possible by the generous support of the Marguerite Casey Foundation and the Revson Foundation.



SOME REFLECTIONS ON MOVEMENT BUILDING

Assets in place

Fellows identified considerable infrastructure for progressive social change already in place. A key asset for movement building is the experience and ongoing commitment of organizers like themselves. However, their role as thinkers as well as doers is generally overlooked and under-resourced in favor of think tanks removed from the grassroots.



History to build on

There is a long and rich history of successful organizing and movement building in the U.S., including recent efforts around environmental justice, workers rights, immigrant rights, sovereignty, and economic justice. There is a lot to be learned from these experiences, but it needs to be documented and disseminated. Fellows assert that those who made the history should be the ones to tell it.

Challenge of diversity

While the diversity of the gathering was a strength, it also revealed challenges that go well beyond the event. Fellows expressed the need to overcome differences and build trust through a better understanding of each other's histories, cultures and protocols.



Unity against racism

Fellows acknowledged the centrality of institutional racism and the need to confront it directly, including within progressive movements. A commitment to racial justice is an essential unifying force.

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Need for unified vision and agenda

Fellows recognized the need to develop an integrated progressive vision and proactive agenda, crossing issues and regions and based on shared values and a collective power analysis. People of color leadership at the grassroots level must be at the core of any process for achieving this vision and agenda.



Need for global vision

Fellows affirmed the need for a global vision but noted that this requires a better understanding of the global economy as well as ways to extend that understanding to the community level. Instead of “think global and act local”, the new paradigm must be “think and act both local and global”.



Desire for collaboration

Fellows demonstrated strong interest in identifying and creating opportunities for collaboration and broad-based movement building. Suggestions included using the renewal of the Voting Rights Act as a springboard for campaigns to extend voting rights to disenfranchised constituencies and dealing with globalization by developing an international living wage campaign.



Importance of electoral engagement

The convening revealed growing interest in electoral politics as an arena for progressive change. Fellows stressed tying electoral activity to base-building and criticized national civic participation efforts disconnected from and unaccountable to grassroots organizations.

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Need for communication

Among elements necessary to advance movement building Fellows emphasized the need to create better communication and linkages, including more convenings and exchanges that provide the opportunity for face-to-face dialogue.

Priority on base-building and self-sufficiency

Fellows observed that movement building is not viable apart from base-building and that local organizing must become more self-sustaining. This means emphasizing leadership development and inter-generational leadership as well as developing new funding sources that lessen reliance on foundation funding and give organizations freedom from tax code restrictions. At the same time, Fellows indicated a desire to find ways of making philanthropy more accountable.



Role of the Alston/Bannerman Fellowship Program

Fellows showed appreciation for the role the sabbatical program plays in sustaining organizers and their organizations, suggested that it can play a valuable networking role and hoped that it will be able to convene similar gatherings in the future.



“At a time when the way forward seems so confusing and the battles for justice seem to be ever more on an epic, overwhelming scale, how rejuvenating to spend time with some of the most amazing, stalwart, committed activists whose lives are a testament to our resolve to keep moving forward. I learned so much from so many. I was constantly in awe of meeting folks I have always heard about, read about, drawn inspiration from. Knowing we are all still plugging away gives us the opportunity to “see the forest for the trees” and know that our work matters. This gathering was such a gift. “

Debbie Wei