



KIRWAN INSTITUTE  
for the Study of Race and Ethnicity

## Building Successful Alliances between African American and Immigrant Groups

Uniting Communities of Color for Shared Success

## Why is this information important?

Alliances between African American and immigrant groups—although posing challenges at each stage of development—have ultimately helped position organizations and communities to overcome mistrust and misunderstanding and attract resources for mutual benefit. Alliances provide a platform for the common interests of both groups to be successfully articulated with one voice. United through alliances, communities of color have been extremely successful in attaining goals and attracting funding.

## How will this information help?

Information presented here is a very brief synopsis of a scholarly research study. Because of immediate practical application and the potential

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impact of the information, the Kirwan Institute has designed this brochure to share what has been learned beyond traditional academic channels.

The study in its entirety is available to you via the Kirwan Institute's

web site at [kirwaninstitute.org](http://kirwaninstitute.org) (see publications/presentations: *African American-Immigrant Alliance Building*, May 2009).



## Who should read this information?

Concepts presented here provide vital information for:

- Leaders, employees, or volunteers of any organization serving a largely African American population;
- Leaders, employees, or volunteers of any organization serving a largely immigrant population;
- Legislators with constituents who are African Americans or immigrants;

- Public and private funding organizations for social service, health, or faith-based organizations; and
- Community members.

## Alliances matter

Leaders of organizations working with African Americans or immigrants who are looking to enhance success will want to learn about collaborative alliances between these two groups. Why? Because such alliances can be a powerful asset to help organizations achieve goals and maximize use of limited resources. The groups share some concerns; collaboration between them can build synergies.

## African American-immigrant alliances matter because...

- A successful alliance has the power to enhance the impact and extend the reach of an organization. This **reach-and-impact** is especially important for organizations working with African American and immigrant populations because these populations include a disproportionately large number of our nation's disadvantaged individuals.
- An established alliance can help **attract funding** from public and private sources. Funders value collaborative efforts—especially in difficult economic times.

- A strategic alliance provides opportunities for interaction and effective communication, possibly resulting in **enhanced cultural understanding and shared policy goals**.
- A successful alliance can unite communities of color to ensure **common concerns** are heard—and ultimately acted upon—by leaders, legislators, and policymakers.
- A well-chosen alliance **can strengthen all alliance members** without diminishing them in any way.

## With opportunities come challenges

Despite the strong benefits to collaboration, it is important to make a realistic assessment of the challenges involved in developing lasting alliances between African American and immigrant groups.

Tensions and lack of understanding between African Americans and immigrants are significant—and are reinforced through isolation and divisive messages in the media. In our society, the media frequently portray relations between African Americans and immigrant groups as rife with conflict—and members of the groups as conforming to negative stereotypes. The reality is far more nuanced. Of course, some tensions are real, particularly those of long standing. Both groups have been pushed to the fringe of society politically, economically, and culturally. As a result, competition for scarce resources can become fierce. They also sometimes

face language barriers and cultural differences, which can be roadblocks to alliance building. These challenges can be amplified by the different role that racial identity often plays for each group—African Americans tend to see race as a central feature of their identities, while many immigrants do not. The result? Misunderstandings, stereotyping, and mutual mistrust—all significant challenges to any alliance building effort.

The gravity of these challenges prevents many organizations and communities from pursuing alliances at all. However, there is a better alternative: to carefully and deliberately consider alliance building, bearing in mind the excellent examples and lessons provided by groups of a similar nature that already have forged productive, sustained alliances.

## Case studies: Best practices explored

The case study information on alliances presented here has been distilled from a study undertaken by the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University. The study, *African American-Immigrant Alliance Building*, articulates the strong potential of alliances and provides practical, immediately applicable recommendations for successful alliance building between African American and immigrant groups.

The alliances discussed here represent only a small sample of the unlimited potential for alliance successes.

The alliances discussed here represent only a small sample of the unlimited potential for alliance successes. Alliances can work. Each alliance presented here has a different focus, location, population served, and partnership structure. Yet, each alliance was able to generate successful outcomes—outcomes that significantly enhanced the communities they serve.

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The following case studies benchmark the three key phases of alliance building where significant challenges are known to occur:

- During the initial formation of the alliance,
- As the alliance comes together in actual project or operational initiatives, and
- As alliances reach for sustainable success.

These case studies emphasize both the variety of challenges overcome and the range of important outcomes achieved to demonstrate the individuality, the flexibility, and the power of alliances.

## Case Study United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations (UCCRO), Chicago, IL

**Formation:** Consisting of 12 member groups serving various ethnic, cultural, and human rights organizations, this collaboration took the form of a grassroots multi-ethnic and multi-cultural human rights alliance. The UCCRO alliance came together with the understanding that communities of color cannot achieve all their goals through independent effort. The alliance organizations recognized the need to bring together resources, expertise, and constituencies for all to achieve long-term success. Member groups also held the belief that by working together they could reduce or eliminate the perception that their communities are rivals—that one community's success is the other's loss.

**Challenges to formation:** The road to building this alliance was not always smooth. Initially, the communities knew of each other primarily through media or other sources that reinforced misperceptions and stereotypes. UCCRO received initial funding from one of the founding organizations; the alliance subsequently sought and received external funds to organize and strategize.

**Working together:** Recognizing that greater cross-cultural understanding could be one beneficial outcome of this alliance, alliance leaders developed specific relationship-building programs including two-day retreats and



ongoing talks. Community members with different ethnic backgrounds learned directly from each other, breaking down negative stereotypes perpetuated largely because of cultural isolation and media portrayals. As a result, the African American community has become more aware of the struggles of area immigrant communities, specifically Latino and Arab communities.

**Sustainability:** Rather than focusing only on short-term issues, this alliance has deliberately crafted a long-term outlook. UCCRO's leaders and community groups believe its full influence and effect will not be felt for

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five to 10 years. To enhance the viability of its long-term vision, UCCRO established an ongoing and unique recruitment strategy to ensure the alliance's positive, focused growth. Truthfully, this long-term view has proven to be challenging to some member groups, as it requires patience to await slowly unfolding results, while also placing alliance goals above individual organizational goals. Acknowledging this, and unwilling to shift its focus from the ideal of a long-term movement, UCCRO has established intermediate goals as a means of marking progress.

## Specific accomplishments

UCCRO has evolved into a highly structured alliance with a well-developed operating system that includes regular meetings for member representatives and a voting executive council. This alliance has accomplished much:

- Following its establishment as an alliance, UCCRO identified five policy areas as priorities—health, education, employment, wealth building, and safety—choosing to focus on important, non-polarizing issues affecting all persons of color.
- UCCRO drafted policy papers for each priority, laying a foundation for the impact on policy discourse UCCRO seeks on the municipal, state, and federal levels.
- The alliance developed and personally delivered racial-justice report cards for state legislators, conveying a powerful message to policymakers that multi-racial, multi-ethnic groups are united and the advancement of all communities is a priority.
- It requested summer jobs for youths, which resulted in 10,000 jobs being created by gubernatorial action. Almost 600 youths were then placed in positions by UCCRO.
- UCCRO developed and implemented a justice/human rights leadership program for future leaders (high school and college ages)—providing cross-cultural and social service experiences.

## Case Study

### *Infant Mortality Reduction Initiative (IMRI), New York City*

**Formation:** IMRI was established when 20 organizations representing African American and Latino groups as well as other interests joined forces. The alliance's goal was to reduce infant mortality within upper Manhattan and the Bronx. This was to be accomplished through specific interventions including the coordination of services from multiple health agencies, providing education for medical providers and non-medical communities and sponsoring media campaigns.

**Challenges to formation:** The main hurdle to overcome was bringing multiple agencies together to write a position paper to be presented to city council for funding. Another was the fact that when the proposal was forwarded, no discrete funding was readily available. The proposal to focus on communities with particularly high infant mortality rates—including those where infant mortality rates were high due to race and ethnicity—ultimately went forward and prevailed. The Infant Mortality Reduction Initiative was initially funded with \$5 million.

**Working together:** The funding continues to be used for established alliance goals including outreach programs, communication, and professional education. This alliance attained its stated goal of reducing infant mortality and other ancillary goals as well—simply advocating the matching of individuals with same-language case workers has dramatically increased the number of women and children receiving vital



public assistance. The alliance holds paid-for-attendance meetings funded by the city. Training focuses on capacity-and-coalition building, cross-cultural communication skills, shaping health education curriculums, and enhancing referral systems.

**Sustainability:** Over time, a small number of member agencies have left the coalition because infant mortality was not within their primary focus. Now grown to more than 40 member groups, IMRI works with a governing committee in which each group has one vote. The entire group votes on strategies and issues.

Funding remains an issue. Although the alliance was initially successful in attracting funding, as with many organizations an ongoing challenge for this alliance is that funding is neither guaranteed nor stable from year to year. To ensure sustainability, outside sources of funding will be required to help maintain the long-term initiatives of this alliance.

### Specific accomplishments

The success of IMRI is demonstrable, as it has:

- Reduced the infant mortality rate within the communities served;
- Had a positive and unexpected impact on providing referrals for additional health matters of community-wide concern such as HIV and TB;
- Increased the number of women connected to pre- and post-natal care;
- Leveraged the alliance's unified voice to enhance funding and funding coordination; and
- Facilitated community-city council communication so that community needs are articulated to funding sources.

### Case Study *CASA de Maryland/NAACP*

**Formation:** This alliance was initiated when leaders from CASA de Maryland, a Latino organization, and three area NAACP branches committed to work together for mutual benefit, with advocacy issues as a shared focus. Interestingly, the imbalance of resources each organization could bring to the collaboration was noted as an impetus for the formation of this alliance. In the Washington, D.C., metro area, Latino immigrant communities had strong institutions, as exemplified by CASA. African



American communities generally lacked institutional resources other than the church. While the NAACP had relatively few tangible resources, it could bring other less tangible resources to an alliance—including visibility and the backing of a large local constituency. CASA's leader recognized that it was in both groups' best interests to form an alliance, and he reached out. Simply put, these groups needed each other for success. By uniting forces they had a stronger voice and impact.

**Challenges to formation:** At the time the alliance was first discussed, relations between African Americans and Latino immigrants in Maryland were strained. Issues included a lack of communication between the two communities as a result of cultural and language differences, mutual stereotypes or biases, strained economic resources, power struggles, and the issue of race.

**Working together:** As the two groups worked together, stereotypes and other issues of bias regularly came up in meetings. Through ongoing interaction, while working together toward common goals, these issues were addressed. Language barriers were eliminated when CASA purchased translation equipment, allowing the alliance to sponsor forums where participants could speak in their preferred language and ensuring others would be able to understand.

**Sustainability:** While no formal channel of communication has been established, the two organizations observe an open door policy with

respect to future dialogue. Funding has permitted CASA to hire a staff member who ensures the mutual assistance programs remain viable when specific issues arise.

Also, the translation equipment purchased is expected to be invaluable in the future when the increased presence of African immigrants will create a need for translation of new languages. The alliance has applied for joint funding to focus on gang issues within the two communities.

### Specific accomplishments

- CASA and NAACP came together for specific, immediate reasons. The united voice of the two groups secured significant change for their communities.
- Alliance-sponsored voter registration drives, candidate debates, and multicultural door-to-door outreach resulted in the election of the first African American and Latino county representatives.
- Education reform legislation was passed, providing funding to help Latino and African American communities.
- Alliance members sponsored outreach and educational opportunities for media and the community in an effort to defeat anti-immigrant legislation.

## Practical application: Exploring the alliance process for your organization

Getting engaged in the alliance process takes time and can initially seem somewhat overwhelming. Like any effort, establishing a strong foundation will help ensure the stability of your structure. This checklist of recommendations will help positively position efforts to build an enduring alliance.

### Within your organization

- Prior to reaching out to explore an alliance, know exactly what your organization's overall goals are as well as your expectations for an alliance.
- Clearly articulate your organization's strengths. Know what you have to offer an alliance and what the incentives for creating or joining an alliance would be—now and in the future.
- Initiate discussion with your staff, volunteers, and board members about the importance of alliances.
- Identify potential alliance partners and establish a plan for outreach.



- Generate a list of potential projects that are consistent with your mission and beneficial to constituents of the target alliance group.
- Devote resources to alliance activities. Identify specific staff members to commit to the alliance and give the alliance a voice within the organization.

## Once established: Recommendations for sustainable success

Ongoing relationships take dedication, patience, resources, and mutual long-term goals. Alliances require the same. Enduring alliances have benchmarked common best practices from which all groups can learn.

### Sustainable alliances:

- Identify non-polarizing issues of common concern and establish clearly stated and attainable goals;
- Set an agenda based on mutually-agreed-upon priorities and expectations;
- Specify and draw upon each organization's expertise;
- Recognize that constituency support must be continually cultivated;
- Establish a structure for ongoing interaction via regular meetings, outreach (including cultural celebrations), and training;
- Set expectations of ongoing success. Recognize social movement and policy issues take time, so think beyond short-term goals to identify and seek funding for intermediate and long-term goals; and

- Engage broad-based African American and immigrant communities:
  - As beneficiaries and ongoing supporters of alliances (strong community support can buoy an alliance long after initial funding has dried up),
  - By identifying and training organizational and community leaders,
  - By maximizing every opportunity to establish the alliance as an organizational priority that benefits all target communities, and
  - By focusing on personal relationships to enhance communication and foster understanding.

### Commit to take action

The challenges to establishing strong African American-immigrant alliances are real. However, the potential benefits are also real—and significant. Although every organization and every alliance is different, note one common element: Every successful alliance was begun when two or more organizations recognized some level of mutual benefit to be derived from a sustained partnership, and the representatives of those organizations and communities chose to act.

# About the Kirwan Institute

*The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity was established in 2003 as a center for interdisciplinary research at The Ohio State University. The Kirwan Institute partners with people, communities, and institutions worldwide to think about, talk about, and act on race in ways that create and expand opportunity for all. For more information about the Kirwan Institute, go to [kirwaninstitute.org](http://kirwaninstitute.org)*

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