Institute on Immigrant Integration Research and Policy

Engineering Cohesive Communities: Social Integration of Foreign-Born Americans

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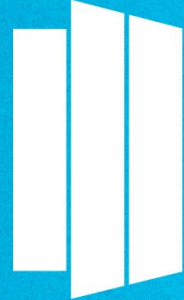# Engineering Cohesive Communities: Social Integration of Foreign-Born Americans

📅 **Monday, June 16**

🕐 **12:30 PM – 4:00 PM**

📍 **Virtual**

**Institute on
Immigrant Integration
Research and Policy**

Introduction

In June 2025, the Institute on Immigrant Integration Research and Policy at the Rockefeller Institute of Government, SUNY hosted a virtual conference that examined the theme of "Engineering Cohesive Communities: Social Integration of Foreign-Born Americans," and explored building inclusive communities through research, policy, and cross-sector collaboration. Key speakers included government leaders, policy makers, scholars, practitioners, and community organizers who shared personal stories, legislative initiatives, and models for social integration. They underscored the urgent need for inclusive governance and social integration of foreign-born Americans.

Discussions

The opening remarks featured **Robert Megna**, President of the Rockefeller Institute of Government, who emphasized the U.S. identity as a nation of immigrants, calling for recognition of shared immigrant heritage as a source of strength and cohesion. He acknowledged the historical cycles of immigration and backlash and urged continued dialogue and research.

Governor David Paterson argued that America's greatness stems from its diversity, calling out growing xenophobia and reaffirming the contributions of immigrants.

Assemblywoman Phara Souffrant Forrest shared her Haitian American story and legislative efforts around language access, adult education, and workforce training.

Assemblywoman Catalina Cruz reflected on her undocumented upbringing, advocating for inclusive governance, cultural inclusion, and community-rooted policies.

Assemblywoman Grace Lee urged efforts to build trust and belonging in immigrant communities.

Maria Teresa Kumar, CEO of Voto Latino, underscored the importance of modernizing immigration systems, combating disinformation, and fostering civic participation.

Watch Opening Session Here

Plenary Panel | Inclusive Governance & Social Integration of Immigrants

Alejandro Portes (Princeton & University of Miami) highlighted selective acculturation—preserving immigrant culture while adopting aspects of the host society—as the most effective integration model. He noted that bilingualism and transnationalism (ties to home countries) are assets, not barriers, and warned that anti-immigrant policies threaten both domestic and global community wellbeing.

Kapil Longani (SUNY Senior Vice Chancellor for Legal Affairs and General Counsel) shared a personal experience with housing discrimination, which motivated his career in public service and emphasized SUNY's mission to provide equitable access to education and belonging, with programs supporting first-generation and immigrant students.

Charles Sherman (The Opportunity Agenda) discussed narrative strategy work to reshape public perception of immigrants through participatory research, messaging, and campaigns like "Immigrants Are New York." He called for shifting the narrative from survival to thriving in public discourse about immigrants.

Natasha Lay (Bow Valley Immigration Partnership, Canada) presented the Workplace Inclusion Charter, a model for engaging employers in immigrant integration through co-designed commitments, training, and public recognition. She emphasized shared responsibility, practical action, and local context in successful inclusion initiatives.

Key Point Stressed from Each Panelist:

- **Inclusive governance must start with clear legal frameworks** that protect immigrant rights and ensure equal access to state and local programs. (*Kapil Longani, Senior VC for Legal Affairs/ General Counsel, SUNY*)

- Highlighted **segmented assimilation theory**, showing how preserving ethnic identity can coexist with full economic and civic integration. (*Alejandro Portes, Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Princeton; Research Professor of Law, Univ. of Miami*)

- Emphasized that **grassroots community partnerships**, like the Bow Valley Workplace Inclusion Charter (WIC), a locally-driven, no-cost toolkit and recognition program supporting employers to create more inclusive workplaces are critical engines of everyday social cohesion. (*Natasha Lay, Executive Director, Bow Valley Immigration Partnership*)

- Argued that **strategic framing in media and storytelling** is essential to counteract cultural anxiety and build positive public narratives around immigrant contribution. (*Charles Sherman, Manager of Narrative Strategy, Opportunity Agenda*)

Watch Full Plenary Session Here

Workshop A | Reducing Inequalities & Alleviating Poverty

Panelists in Workshop A explored economic disparities produced by structural issues—not by lack of personal merit—and the ways in which these disparities create inequality, poverty, and psychological alienation. Several expert panelists shared research and programmatic insights on how policy and institutional practices affect refugees, immigrants, and English learners in education and the workforce.

Rey Koslowski (University at Albany) discussed "brain waste" among high-skilled refugees in New York State, emphasizing that refugees are crucial to upstate urban growth. Many are underemployed due to language barriers, unrecognized credentials, and lack of support. He proposed expanding job coaching, targeted funding, and ESL training tailored to professionals.

Margaret Shrager (Prince George's Community College) **& Joanna Winningham** (Maryland Department of Labor) presented the Maryland Skilled Immigrant Task Force, which builds cross-sector partnerships to support internationally trained professionals, produces career pathway resources and hosts targeted job fairs, trains workforce providers and businesses on inclusive hiring practices, and operates on a volunteer basis with strong interagency collaboration.

Esmeralda Sánchez Salazar (Penn State University) presented research on English learners (ELs) in Houston public schools. Findings show that ELs reclassified earlier in school take more college-level courses and have higher college completion rates. Delayed reclassification can limit access to advanced coursework, impacting long-term success. She advocated timely reclassification, broader course access, and embedded language instruction.

Watch Full Workshop A Here

Workshop B | Narrowing Social and Psychological Distance: Promoting Connections

Panelists in Workshop B focused on the interpersonal and emotional dimensions of immigrant integration, exploring how empathy, mutual understanding, and reduced prejudice can promote better cohesion between immigrants and native-born Americans. The workshop featured several expert presenters, including **Mustafa Rafat** (Washington University in St. Louis), who presented research on refugees with disabilities. He highlighted gaps in employment and healthcare inclusion and spotlighted the lack of disability awareness among both refugees and service providers. He examined the tragic consequences of the lack of language and disability accommodation (e.g., deaf refugees facing severe health risks due to a lack of interpreters).

Jacob Richard Thomas (Corvinus University, Budapest) offered a critical theory of assimilationism. He challenged the idea that immigrants must fully conform to the host society and illustrated the dangers of forced assimilation. He advocated for selective acculturation and mutual cultural respect.

Charlie Sherman (The Opportunity Agenda) explored narrative strategy to promote pro-immigrant sentiment. He described how media, politicians, and culture shape perceptions through repeated narratives. He shared examples of campaigns (e.g., "New York Proud") that challenge anti-immigrant rhetoric and emphasized the need for communication strategies alongside policy change.

Christian Matias (Every Campus A Refuge) explained how college campuses can act as hyperlocal refugee resettlement hubs. She shared a framework for building "resettlement campus ecosystems," advocated for cultural humility and trauma-informed care and described training models that blend administrative change with social movement strategies.

Watch Full Workshop B Here

Workshop C | Employing Levers of Integration

Workshop C focused on the levers of integration. A Driver's License Project in Marin County, CA presented by **Lucia Leon** (Dominican University of California) & **Joana Castro Simonini** (Canal Alliance) in helped immigrants (especially undocumented) obtain driver's licenses using community-driven, culturally sensitive strategies. Through workshops, individualized support, bilingual student advocates, legal screenings, and Department of Motor Vehicle assistance, the project was able to improve legal stability, community engagement, and economic mobility. The Food Pantry of Rural Pennsylvania is another model that served as an Integration Hub. **Hazel Velasco Palacios** (Penn State University) argued that these organizations evolved to become community integration spaces for immigrants. They offer English classes, cultural events, and access to services. They foster social ties, support networks, and belonging.

Ken Irish Bramble, and Marsha Webster (Medgar Evers College, CUNY) presented findings on their study, which shows voter participation and the underrepresentation of naturalized citizens in voting. They discussed barriers, including confusion about eligibility and lack of registration knowledge. They suggested that more outreach and education are needed to empower immigrant voters.

Tsveta Dobreva (University at Albany) argued that language programs serve as a bridge to academic and social integration for immigrant/refugee students. These programs help build academic language, social capital, and identity transformation. Successful models integrate credit-bearing courses, peer mentorship, and cultural orientation. She recommended that universities design holistic programs that combine language learning with academic and social support.

Watch Full Workshop C Here

Workshop D | Civic and Community Engagement in Social and Economic Integration

Workshop D focused on civic engagement through community-based models. **Tim Doherty** (West Hill Refuge Welcome Center) shared a grassroots initiative that transformed a blighted urban neighborhood by integrating refugees into affordable housing and community life. He emphasized community ownership, restorative justice, education, and the importance of engaging residents in revitalization efforts, and raised concerns about ICE raids and the importance of maintaining trust and safety.

David Monda (The Graduate Center, CUNY) examined the impact of mass deportation on a tightly knit immigrant community. He discussed social capital, informal financial networks, language barriers, and the need for legal regularization. He highlighted the risks immigrants face under current immigration enforcement and the importance of culturally competent outreach.

Ahyoung Kim (Asian American Federation) explored bridging digital and economic exclusion through the "Thriving in Online Market Space" (TOMS) program, which demonstrated how technical and soft skills training enabled immigrant small business owners to thrive in the digital economy. She stressed the importance of culturally responsive workforce development.

Maria Figueroa (Rockefeller Institute of Government) profiled the organizing efforts of "Los Deliveristas Unidos" and their fight for fair labor conditions. She showed how immigrant delivery workers won protections like minimum wage and bathroom access through collective advocacy.

Robert Smith (The Graduate Center, CUNY) detailed a unique legal remedy for the underrepresentation of Latino voters via cumulative voting. He compared the divergent political trajectories of two local figures to demonstrate long-term civic empowerment and transformation. He urged New York State to adopt voting rights policies that do not rely solely on geographic compactness.

Watch Full Workshop D Here

Conference speakers communicated three messages:

1. Lack of social integration and community cohesion is detrimental not just to foreign-born communities but to the collective wellbeing and national interest;

2. Social integration and community cohesion will not happen on their own but must be enabled and intentionally activated; and

3. Evidence-based tools and models are available and can be adapted to and replicated in different communities.

The conference concluded with a call to action and a reminder of Assemblymember Forrest's words to be "architects of shared prosperity" and to ensure that no one is left behind, echoing the message that striving for collective and shared prosperity is a moral, economic, and political imperative.

Policy and Practice Implications

Conference speakers emphasized that the stakes are high. Social integration of immigrants fosters peaceful, prosperous, and democratic communities, where everyone feels belonging, trust, and shared responsibility. When newcomers feel like perpetual outsiders, fragmentation ensues, driving isolation, unrest, and economic loss. Social integration goes beyond instrumental presence, where immigrants are perceived (and perceive themselves) only for economic or legal value. When immigrants feel a sense of belonging and are respected for their humanity, they become rooted in their communities. True inclusion treats newcomers as full participants, valuing their cultures, narratives, and long-term contributions. Rooted existence entails becoming "in and of the nation." It cultivates cohesion where members are unified and can come together to solve their problems, hold each other accountable to preserving collective wellbeing, and commit to leaving no one behind.

Collectively, conference speakers provided a blueprint for moving from exclusionary "othering" toward inclusive, cohesive communities where immigrants and long-time residents co-create shared prosperity.

They called for a top-down as well as a bottom-up approach in advancing integration at the individual, organizational, and macro levels.

They examined interventions in three Domains: (1) institutions and systems, (2) immigrant communities, and (3) receiving community.

1. Institutional and Systemic Reforms

Civic and economic inclusion must be structurally designed into policy and practice, from local governance to federal immigration laws. Government and institutional practices must center equity and belonging. There is a need for reforms on the institutional, policy, and legal fronts to create an integrated and inclusive system. Laws advancing language assistance, healthcare and educational access, workforce training, and pathways to citizenship are critical. Several urgent changes would avoid deskilling, underemployment, disparities in educational and economic outcomes for foreign-born Americans, as well as duplication and gaps in the service system. Speakers lifted several arenas of action:

- Recognition of foreign obtained credentials and provision of licensing to help foreign-born professionals access jobs commensurate with their skills and training.

- Credentialing assessments provided to newcomers to ensure they are guided to appropriate career pathways. Assessments of credentials will address an unintended consequence in the refugee support systems that often force immediate job placement, sidelining long-term career development.

- Small business support programs that are attuned to the specific challenges facing foreign-born prospective entrepreneurs.

- Integration of workforce development, social support and legal assistance ecosystems: Breaking silos that create inefficiencies and ineffectiveness and optimizing capacities through strengthened cross-sector collaborations and coordination are needed. Integration requires alignment across government, civil society, businesses, and academia. There is a need for diverse stakeholders (government, nonprofits, educators) to coalesce around common goals. Institutional backing and practical resource sharing can advance system integration and remedy fragmentation.

- Reform of educational practices that exclude English Language Learners from accessing college-level courses in secondary school and reform the classification system of English Learners to root out college entry and completion disparities.

- Legal protections and remedies of broken trust and lack of safety for families of the undocumented and the fallout from separations of families and the tearing apart of communities.

- Nontraditional tools like cumulative voting and worker-led organizing provide creative paths toward civic engagement and representation.

2. Immigrant Communities: Immigrant-Centered Support Infrastructure

New Americans often encounter systems that are foreign in their design and structure. Information about how to navigate education, housing, employment, healthcare, financial, and other systems is often tailored to a mainstream audience who has a different level of institutional familiarity and language proficiency than that of a foreign-born resident. The inability to communicate or navigate unfamiliar systems can be alienating and isolating. Speakers' calls to action underscored the following:

- Leveraging the power of community-based organizations and higher educational institutions as incubators of inclusion.

- Harness the potential of organizations to provide assistance and support in food, housing, urban development, employment, healthcare, education, and language programs as catalysts and accelerators of trustbuilding, social capital, and referrals to services.

- Build capacity and facilitate access to supportive services through a robust and well-endowed infrastructure. Whether through licenses, voting, or education, these initiatives unlock broader opportunities. Effective integration efforts require multilingual, culturally appropriate services to bridge access gaps.

- Engage immigrant communities in revitalization of neighborhoods, decision-making and advocacy. Communities thrive when residents are treated as agents, not clients, and given real ownership in revitalization, decision-making, and policy advocacy.

- Civic engagement and Political Participation: Educate foreign-born residents about their voting rights, voter eligibility, and registration to amplify their voices.

3. The Receiving Community: Interrupting Xenophobia and Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric

Creating an immigrant-friendly environment relies heavily on narratives and messages that shape public perception, influence policy, and foster social cohesion. Successful narratives tend to humanize immigrants, emphasize shared values, and highlight contributions. Speakers noted the need to operationalize shared values and shared goals to vision and action to bridge the existing gap between values and vision that has plagued communication and public messaging about immigrants; a gap that allowed anti-immigrant rhetoric to infect public discourse unabated.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric, polices, and practices are fueled by macro-level forces in the economy. Economic inequality and criminal justice issues create a scapegoat effect where immigrants become the target of frustration with people's place in the economy and in society. Moreover, cultural anxiety over demographic changes and the different racial, ethnic, and cultural make-up brought about by current-day immigrants fan the flames of anti-immigrant rhetoric. Anti-immigrant and nativist rhetoric interrupts the transition from instrumental living to rooted existence at the detriment of the nation's interest. Countering Exclusionary Narratives is critical, so is rejecting misinformation and xenophobia.

Action items in this area include:

- Narratives & Messaging.

    o Craft sustained public campaigns that repeats consistent messaging and accomplish the following goals:

        ▪ Humanize immigrants and evoke empathy and understanding of the ties that bind humanity together. Use storytelling and public campaigns to shift the narrative.

        ▪ Emphasize shared heritage and highlight economic and cultural contributions.

        ▪ Underscore that immigrants are critical to population growth and labor market expansion at the lower and upper ends of the labor market's ladder. It is indispensable to the American economy. In the words of Alejandro Portes, "Neither Silicon Valley nor the large farms can survive without immigrants." Immigrants drive innovation, fill labor gaps, and offset population loss in many cities.

- Endorse Selective Acculturation & Transnationalism.

  - Raise awareness about the preservation of homecountry languages and ties—as assets for individual success and community vitality. Promote evidence that suggests that transnationalism does not slow down the integration process but has positive outcomes on individuals and communities. Bilingualism should not be perceived as a threat because research shows that bilingualism and the preservation of languages brought from home countries, besides building English language skills, have been a positive asset for the individual and the communities that adopt them. Bilinguals perform better in school and have better occupational achievement in the long run than monolinguals.

- Advocate for rooting out negative media rhetoric and promote immigrant-friendly narratives.

- Institutional Practices

  - Promote cultural humility, bias training, and recognition of foreign credentials to unlock immigrants' full potential.

  - Deepen understanding of how undervaluing foreign qualifications leads to brain waste which in turn causes economic loss that is not just personal; it affects state tax revenue, productivity, and social cohesion.

- Bridging Physical and Psychological Distance

  - Support programs that foster interpersonal connections and social bonds to promote mutual understanding and reduce alienation, fear of differences and stereotyping.

In conclusion, speakers collectively underscored cross-cutting principles of (a) shared responsibility, e.g., recognizing integration as a collective endeavor, spanning policy, business, education, and civil society; (b) holistic Inclusion, calling for moving beyond legal status or jobs, and focusing on social, emotional, and belonging; and (c) structural design in embedding equity and belonging into laws, programs, and everyday institutional practices.

About the Authors

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**Institute on
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Research and Policy**

The Institute on Immigrant Integration Research and Policy seeks to advance the economic, social, and political integration of foreign-born New Yorkers and to promote responsive policies and practices.

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