

A Study of Innovative Integration Strategies

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*While local governments are making efforts to create more inclusive social policies, little is known about what these policies are and how they are developed. To better understand municipal immigrant integration practices, my Master's Thesis, *Building Integrated Communities: Innovative Bureaucratic Incorporation Strategies for North Carolina*, completed in May 2012 examined integration using two methods: 1) analyzing strategies local jurisdictions employ across the country to integrate immigrants and 2) presenting a case study to better understand the contextual, structural, and institutional factors of a two-year strategic planning process to develop an immigrant integration plan in three local jurisdictions in North Carolina, a new immigrant destination. From this analysis, we gleaned practical recommendations for other local governments interested in developing similar immigrant integration initiatives that will be discussed in this article.*

Background

Deliberate actions of local governments to make communities more inclusive are increasingly prevalent through the adoption of innovative social policies that foster immigrant integration. The current changing geography of immigrant and refugee settlement and the devolution of immigration enforcement policies to the local level are bringing new challenges to cities and regions across the nation. As many of these areas are not equipped to address the challenges of population growth and new language and cultural barriers, the time is ripe for local governments to use community planning to develop and implement innovative integration strategies. The following will provide information about best practices nationwide and a case study of an immigrant integration community planning exercise.

New Geography of Immigrant Settlement

While traditional immigration destinations, such as Los Angeles, New York, and Miami continue to attract large numbers of immigrants, spatial settlement across the country is evolving. For example, Southeastern cities are now experiencing unprecedented levels of immigration, resulting in rapid sociodemographic shifts. In North Carolina, the Hispanic population grew by 393%—the

highest rate of any state from 1990-2000. Once a state with few Hispanic residents, North Carolina is now home to second and third generation Hispanics who make up 8.6% of the total state population (U.S. Census Bureau,

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2010). This statewide statistic masks the exponential growth in the foreign-born population of many local jurisdictions that experienced upwards of over a 1,000% increase in Hispanics in just one decade (Nguyen and Gill, 2010).

Several factors contribute to this “new geography” of immigration occurring in the Southeast since the mid-1980s. For the largest emigrating country, Mexico, stricter border enforcement from all levels of government in the Southwest discouraged settlement in these states and shifted migration to new destinations in the Southeast (Durand, Massey, and Capoferro, 2005). In addition, hostile anti-immigrant sentiments in traditional immigrant gateways, such as California and Arizona, garnered international attention and directed settlement away from these states (Durand, Massey, and Capoferro, 2005). Furthermore, the lure of jobs, first agricultural and later construction, was a big draw to Southeastern states, such as North Carolina (Gill, 2010).

Challenges of Newcomers

As immigrants and refugees move to new communities, they face a number of challenges when settling in new areas (“receiving regions”). Often, fewer immigrant advocacy organizations exist and organizational capacity is lower. Immigrants are likely to live in spatially segregated, low-income, and minority neighborhoods, which can result in less access to services and opportunities, and social isolation. In the labor force, immigrants tend to be concentrated in low-wage, low-skill jobs that lack health benefits (OECD, 2009). While many view this as the typical plight of newly immigrated or first-generation immigrants, there is evidence that second or third generations often continue to face these same conditions.

Beyond these living and working challenges, recent immigrants face both subtle and overt discrimination due to racial, ethnic, and sociocultural differences. Language barriers, mistrust of law enforcement, and lack of access to city services are just a few examples of obstacles to immigrant integration (Coelho, 2012). There are also fewer immigrant political leaders and decision-makers advocating on behalf of immigrants and immigrant issues.

Immigrant Integration

As receiving regions are strained by rapid population growth and newcomers are experiencing challenges in their new communities, local government have the opportunity to relieve these tensions through policies that support immigrant integration. For immigrants to contribute fully in new destinations, they need to be integrated into their local communities. Grant Makers Concerned With Immigrants and Refugees, a national not-for-profit, and captures that, in practice, integration involves mutual adaptation for newcomers and the receiving community. Immigrant integration is:

A dynamic, two-way process in which newcomers and the receiving society work together to build secure, vibrant, and cohesive communities.

(Grant Makers Concerned With Immigrants and Refugees, 2012)

However, achieving integration is not an easy process—national policies designed to manage the flow and rate of immigration are rarely accompanied by policies to support integration at the local level, particularly in relation to the adaptation of existing social and economic policies and administrative procedures to the meet the unique needs of immigrants. While integration strategies are typically administered through various public, private, and not-for-profit organizations, little is known of the role of integration practices and policies led by local governments. As it stands now in practice, this role is a mixed-bag. While some local public agencies already work to incorporate immigrants, such as health clinics, others try to marginalize and disenfranchise them (e.g. law enforcement agencies). Levels of “bureaucratic incorporation,” therefore, vary by agency and across local governments. However, when local jurisdictions do work to integrate immigrants, little is known about the process and the outcomes (Marrow 2009a, Jones-Correa 2008b, Massey 2008).

In addition, the academic community has little information about this subject. The literature on immigrant integration primarily focuses on where immigrants migrate – traditional gateway vs. new destination and city vs. suburb vs. rural– and how they integrate (e.g. modes economic, sociocultural, or political incorporation) (DeWind, 1997). The new geography of immigration raises questions about whether traditional models of immigrant incorporation, which are based on urban immigrant gateways, adequately capture contemporary immigrants’ experiences (Marrow, 2005a; Marrow 2009b). An evaluation of the sociological literature reveals that there have been three main conceptual frameworks for understanding immigrant integration: “human capital,” “modes of incorporation,” and “contexts of reception” (Marrow, 2005). Some authors argue that these traditional frameworks do not adequately consider the scope of structural and contextual factors shaping immigrants’ experiences and outcomes (Jones-Correa, 2005a). In other words, these frameworks emphasize individual characteristics, but fail to consider how and to what extent structural, contextual, and institutional factors play a role in incorporating immigrant groups.

National Analysis of Local Jurisdiction Immigrant Integration Strategies

In order to understand what, if anything, local governments are doing to encourage immigrant integration, web research and practitioner interviews were used to identify best practices from across the country. In an attempt to find examples of policies from a wide

range of cities, over a hundred policies were examined for jurisdictions in every region of the country from a range of large, medium and small cities. Analysis revealed that integration practices vary greatly by jurisdiction. The vast majority of the immigrant integration strategies are singular initiatives (“Priority Area Integration Strategies”) adopted by only one public agency that often focus on a defined topic, such as healthcare or K-12 education. On the other hand, there are a few jurisdictions that have comprehensive immigrant integration plans that involve multiple agencies and institutions across various sectors and cover a broad range of integration strategies. These initiatives (“Strategic Planning for Immigrant Integration”) are developed through a strategic community planning process involving numerous stakeholders. These two types of strategies are presented below:

1. Priority Area Integration Policies. Most municipal jurisdictions do not have the capacity or resources to conduct strategic planning for immigrant integration and, therefore opt to focus efforts on specific priority areas. These strategies are either stand-alone policies or they are combined with other policies. These initiatives could include, but are not limited to: literacy services, library programs, a municipal diversity committee or office, a one-stop information center for immigrants, immigrant leadership development programs, and programs to improve police-community relationships.

2. Strategic Planning for Immigrant Integration. Strategic planning processes that involve individuals from all different sectors, including immigrants and their advocates, result in some of the most ambitious and multi-faceted plans for local-level immigrant integration. There are few cities that take on this planning process, which takes months, if not years, to complete, and serves a multi-ethnic population, as well as requires implementation through multi-sector and multi-agency involvement. These plans often include a number of priority area integration policies, but often work collaboratively within difference departments and also can institutionalize

citywide immigrant friendly practices such as translation services. The few cities that completed immigrant integration plans; Dayton, Ohio, Boise, Idaho, and Detroit, Michigan, consider investment in immigrants as an economic revitalization or economic development tool. These places face similar contemporary economic challenges, with loss of jobs, industrial restructuring, and a shrinking population. These policies are typically adopted by local or county governments as a long-range vision for the community.

While many of these strategies are the core responsibility of local government agencies and staff, public administrators are finding ways to work across complicated jurisdictional lines by partnering with non-governmental organizations. This partnership is beneficial because many direct services (such as financial literacy education, affordable healthcare, housing etc.) are initiated by non-governmental groups. Both types of local government integration policies provide a channel to create more inclusive communities in some fashion. However, comprehensive policies developed through an inclusive strategic planning process tend to have more community and municipal buy-in, have clear long-term goals and objectives, produce impactful administrative changes throughout the local government, and are adopted as official plans. These plans are also more challenging and resource intensive to develop.

Case Study

To better understand the challenges and opportunities of developing a comprehensive strategic plan for immigrant integration, I worked closely with and



Elements of Building Integrated Communities. The initiative emphasizes trust, communication, access, understanding, participation, safety and well-being. *Image courtesy of Building Integrated Communities.*

evaluated the Building Integrated Communities (BIC) program initiated by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Latino Migration Project and the School of Government. BIC provides key lessons about the planning process through which integration policies can be developed. Conceptualized in 2009 and funded by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the intent of this initiative is to help North Carolina city governments successfully engage with immigrant and refugee populations in order to promote local economic development, enhance livability, and improve relationships through a strategic community planning process.

Over the course of two years, the BIC research team partnered with three local jurisdictions in North Carolina to develop strategies and community plans: City of Highpoint, City of Greenville, and Orange County. Communities were chosen to participate through an RFP application process based, in part, on the willingness and commitment of elected officials – particularly the mayor – to engage in a long-term planning process that would result in actionable strategies. In its selection process, the BIC research team intentionally sought geographically and socio-economically diverse locales. In addition to closely participating in each aspect of the strategic planning process in each locale, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders contributed to this analysis.

After application approval, the research team facilitated a series of preparation meetings with community partners to coordinate outreach efforts and identify stakeholders for future planning meetings. In each of these places, the Human Relations Departments and staff from these departments were responsible for identifying these stakeholders, which included elected officials, local government staff, police, fire, and EMS

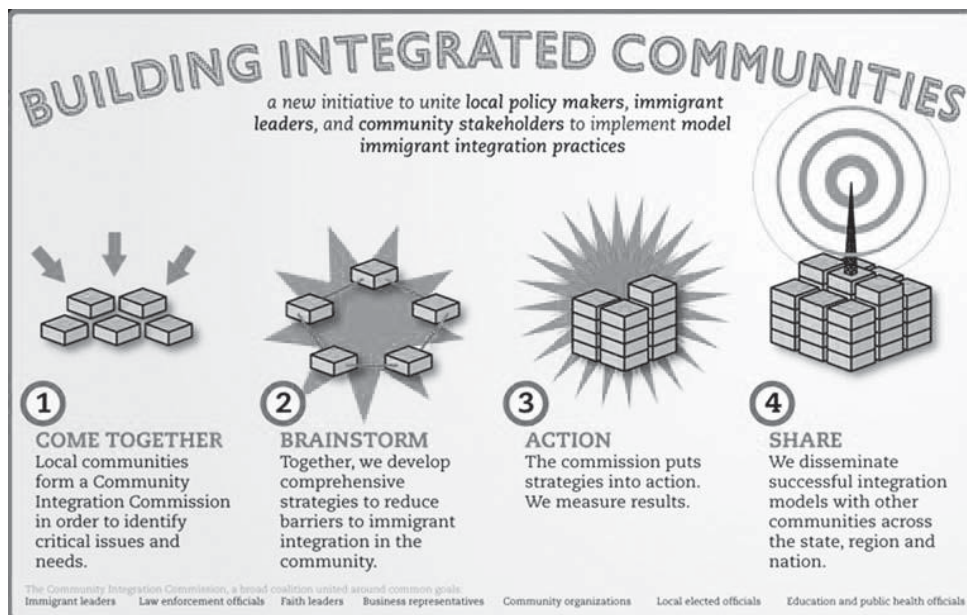
staff, immigrant leaders, immigrants and community members. Once stakeholders were invited, a series of three planning meetings were held over the course of a year. Each of these meetings was guided by a professional facilitator with the purpose of creating consensus around specific action strategies, which were then documented in a community action plan. Every plan was context specific, sensitive to institutional capacities, tailored to the specific immigrant populations identified in each city, and geared towards sustainable practices. In preparation for these meetings, the BIC research team identified promising immigrant integration practices across the nation that could be tailored to the specific context and needs of each local jurisdiction. The second year of the project involved implementation of the community action plan.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations

Although BIC implemented similar methods in each community, the planning processes evolved much differently in each site, resulting in very different action plans. These differences were the result of the specific context of each jurisdiction (e.g. different actors, immigrant experiences, and government structure). These three sites offered several valuable lessons for future immigrant integration planning initiatives:

1. Community Readiness

Having elected officials and municipal staff fully invested is critical to the success of comprehensive immigrant integration policies. Out of the three selected sites, the City of Greenville progressed most rapidly in their planning process. There were some key indicators that the Greenville was the most prepared site to start this process of developing an immigrant integration plan.



Building Integrated Communities. An initiative to unite local policy makers, immigrant leaders, and community stakeholders to implement model immigrant integration practices. Image courtesy of Building Integrated Communities.

From their application materials, Greenville demonstrated a commitment to inclusivity in their community by already having a Human Relations Council with a diverse multi-ethnic representation of immigrants. Additionally, the city had already partnered with local advocacy groups to examine the challenges experienced by underserved populations in their community. Greenville also submitted application letters of commitment from local community institutions and the mayor, which indicated wide-ranging support with institutions that could provide strong social capital. Once the stakeholder meetings began, attendance by staff members in relevant city departments and immigrant community leaders indicated that the Greenville city government and the Human Relations Council had taken significant steps to conduct outreach.

2. Starting With a Fact-Base

A common theme that arose from all of our sites was the sense that the stakeholders needed a better common understanding of their immigrant communities. Stakeholders from each site were wary of making decisions and moving forward before this step was taken. The planning team conducted an asset map, needs assessment, and analyzed sociodemographic data from the census. However, instead of the planners performing the data collection, it would be useful to have the local stakeholders involved in data collection before the strategic planning process began. This could (1) build capacity for data collection among local stakeholders; (2) identify and build relationships with other stakeholders from various sectors (non-profit, for-profit, faith-based, public) interested in immigrant integration; (3) build confidence in making decisions with adequate knowledge about the immigrant community and (4) develop more realistic expectations and goals about immigrant integration strategies.

For example, in the City of Greenville, after the first facilitated strategic planning meeting, the stakeholders decided that they wanted to collect more information about the immigrant population. They decided to hold focus groups among English as a Second Language students taking classes at a local community college. After several focus groups were conducted, new information was shared with the stakeholders in the planning meetings, giving them greater confidence that the discussion and decisions being made were appropriate for the immigrant community.

3. Retaining Stakeholder Engagement

Maintaining engagement throughout the process can be challenging, but is necessary to creating a successful plan. During the first stakeholder meeting in two BIC sites, the number of people in the room exceeded expectations. In Highpoint, for example, the first meeting involved over 100 individuals from city service agencies, prominent community institutions, local businesses, and the immigrant community. However, in subsequent meetings,

the number of stakeholders declined substantially, which proved to have both negative and positive consequences. On one hand, large community meetings can be hard to manage and can also make it difficult to get through all pertinent material in the allotted time. On the other hand, the loss of key stakeholders skewed representation towards individuals who felt more comfortable contributing in such a format (e.g. public staff members), and away from some valuable voices, such as recent immigrants.

The drop-off in participation may be due to connections made between stakeholders that allowed them to accomplish their goals in the first meeting, making attendance at subsequent meetings unnecessary. For example, a city employee wanted a forum to introduce herself and her staff to immigrants in order to build trust. After the first stakeholder meeting, the staff member connected with community members, but then the staff member did not participate in subsequent planning meetings because her needs were already met. While these informal connections are useful towards the goal of immigrant integration, it would be even more important to encourage stakeholders to stay engaged throughout the entire process. One way to do this is to be transparent and clear about expectations for stakeholders. In particular, the length of the planning process, the number of meetings, date and location of meetings, and amount of individual effort involved should be made clear at the beginning of the process. To encourage participation and engagement, leaders should explain what the ultimate outcome will be and how participants may benefit could also offer incentives for participation and engagement.

4. Balancing Immigrant Representation

The benefits of immigrant participation in decision-making processes are invaluable. There should be representative participation by all immigrant groups—however, this poses several challenges. First, identifying and reaching out to different immigrant groups to encourage participation is often challenging. Second, language barriers must be overcome. The more groups, the greater the variation of languages, and the more difficult it is to facilitate an inclusive meeting. Third, if there is broad representation across immigrant groups, it raises questions about how the different needs and concerns of immigrant groups will be accounted for and prioritized in the integration plan. Will larger groups have a greater voice? Should strategies only be implemented if it benefits all groups? Finally, a more inclusive planning process involving a larger number of groups will be slower and take longer. Keeping participants engaged in such a long process may be challenging.

These considerations raise questions about the balance between immigrant representation and having a manageable community planning process that results in actionable decisions. In Highpoint, the first stakeholder meeting was attended by a wide range of immigrant groups and immigrant advocates. With over 100 participants,

the diversity in the room was impressive. It was clear that immigrant integration was a salient topic for the stakeholders. However, with only a five-hour window for the first meeting, the large number of participants, and the need for language interpretation, the process was slow and not engaging. For example, introductions of participants took three times as long as at other sites.

In contrast, during the first meeting in Greenville, there was significant representation of municipal leaders and leaders from the immigrant community, however, only a few immigrants were present. While these meetings were more predictable and moved along as planned, the local leaders expressed discomfort about being the voice for the immigrant community. Thereafter, they decided to hold focus groups of immigrants in ESL classes at the community college to discuss the ideas.

One way to balance immigrant representation and having a manageable community planning process would be for stakeholders to conduct focus groups with a wide range of immigrant groups to assess needs and challenges towards immigrant integration, develop relationships, and establish lines of communication between stakeholders and immigrants. For the strategic planning meetings, a select number of immigrants who are committed to the entire planning process should be encouraged to attend. This method attempts to offer both immigrant representation, as well as manageability.

5. The Role of the Facilitator and Planner is Critical to Success

The sensitive topics and, at times, contentious

issues that arose during planning meetings highlighted the necessity of professional facilitators adept at guiding discussion, encouraging participation from all attendees, and being able to steer large group discussion forward. The professional facilitators devised engaging meetings that employed a variety of techniques to break down power imbalances and encourage knowledge sharing between participants. These techniques included paired interviews, small group discussions, larger group discussions, and allowing individuals to write down responses for the facilitator to read anonymously. While the facilitator may often be a planner, BIC hired professional facilitators who were not planners.

The planners who were present during the meetings provided both technical and substantive expertise without steering the stakeholders in a pre-determined direction. The technical expertise came in the form of map-making, quantitative and qualitative research analyses, and plan writing. The planners also provided substantive expertise on local immigrant integration strategies, immigration trends, plan-making and plan implementation.

The challenge for the planners in this situation was knowing when to assert expertise and when to allow the stakeholders to work through the process. It was important for the planners to remind stakeholders of the goals of the planning process and provide necessary expertise but to not suggest what decisions should be made or the types of integration strategies were best. Instead, the planners stressed that the plan should 1) rely on existing institutional and organizational capacities, 2) build on available resources and community assets, 3) be



BIC Collaborators in Greenville, NC. *Image courtesy of Building Integrated Communities.*

feasible, and 4) be sustainable even given staff turnover or changes in local elected officials. The planners allowed the stakeholders to determine which immigrants groups were served and prioritize the types of integration strategies in the plan.

Another key lesson learned from this process is that this type of planning process is not linear. New stakeholders would arrive at each meeting, thereby raising questions that had already been addressed and moving the direction of the conversation sometimes backwards or sideways instead of forward. Also, the introduction of new ideas or best integration practices at each session piqued curiosities, often inspiring a new direction for the integration strategy under discussion.

The BIC team learned from this process that the team needed to summarize the accomplishments of each previous meeting at the beginning of each new meeting, define the goals to be accomplished at the end of each meeting, and to direct and redirect stakeholders so that progress is made. But, the team must do all this while not marginalizing new stakeholders, who were often of different immigrant groups than those that had been participating previously. Being sensitive to newcomers to the process, who may also represent different immigrant groups, while trying to move the planning process along requires patience and practice at being inclusive.

6. Managing Expectations and Outcomes

In undertaking an immigrant integration planning process, it is important to manage the expectations and outcomes of stakeholders. Some stakeholders may have unrealistic expectations or goals that are infeasible due to political, financial, or institutional barriers. These expectations and goals may be listed in the plan as long-term goals, but caution should be taken to outline the steps involved in realizing these goals if they are listed. If this is not done, stakeholders may become discouraged because their voices are not heard or they may feel that their ideas are not taken seriously. For example, in all of our sites, the idea of developing a multi-cultural community center was raised. This would require significant capital funding and take years to develop. Such an ambitious project, if included in the plan, should outline who would be responsible for leading the project, where funding might come from (e.g. through grant writing or the local government), and how long it might take to accomplish this.

Conclusion

Changes in immigration patterns and the disparate and unequal integration of immigrant groups create a population that remains in permanent limbo. We are now at a crossroads where changes in immigrant settlement are providing new challenges to communities across the nation. Communities working together to forge common bonds between cities and residents can ameliorate these challenges and help newcomers to integrate. The lessons

outlined here seek to help other cities that want to develop more welcoming, integrative policies and practices to incorporate immigrants into the social, economic, physical and civic fabric. More and more local governments are realizing the importance of integrating institutions across various sectors to help immigrants settle and become productive members of their new communities.

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