

Immigration and its Controversies: Challenges Confronting the Public Service

Christopher Daniel
Kentucky State University

This symposium addresses multiple challenges that immigration poses to the public service. Individual contributors explore: (1) strategies employed by counties to provide health care to undocumented immigrants; (2) factors affecting engagement of immigrant non-profit organizations with policy makers; (3) economic rationale for federal provision of immigration related aid to the states; and (4) immigrant integration initiatives undertaken by executive order at the state level. These articles demonstrate that political controversies about immigration and immigrants affect the public service. Arguably, nativism and public confusion sometimes impair both policy making and effective service provision. So, an improved national meta-narrative is needed, one that allays natives' unjustified fears of Latinos, Muslims, and others. Instead of being regarded as a problem, immigration needs to be recognized as a means of addressing economic and demographic dilemmas facing the nation. Working within positive frames of reference public servants can help immigrant assimilation successfully take place.

How prosperous, vibrant, and equitable mid-21st century America becomes will be determined partly by how effectively contemporary immigrants and their descendents are integrated into the nation's economic, cultural and political life. Public policies sometimes foster or impede immigrants' success, as do implementing actions taken by governmental and non-profit professionals (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Integration is especially challenging for newcomers who are poor, non-white, do not initially speak English, and/or lack legal status. When deciding how to address immigration-related challenges both policy makers and service providers confront conflicting pressures as nativists and immigrant rights advocates promote opposing agendas.

Despite immigrant integration's salience and timeliness, it has thus far attracted only limited public administration scholarship. Others, of course, have written extensively about

immigration. Sociologists, demographers, historians, economists, students of ethnic politics, journalists, and polemicists have all addressed this topic, but most of their voluminous work has not focused on challenges that public and non-profit organizations confront. Hopefully more literature on “Immigration and the Public Service” will emerge over time. This symposium takes a small step along that road, reflecting the field’s dedication to both practical problem solving and promotion of social equity.

Immigration challenges public service in varying ways and at different levels. Some challenges reflect the day-to-day experiences of street level bureaucrats, including those responsible for delivering public health services and administering social programs. Of course, to sustain effective service provision over time, leaders must develop and nurture the institutional capacities of both governmental and non-profit organizations. Similarly, service delivery and capacity-building both occur within broader contexts, environments that may themselves sometimes require transformation.

Given the scale of the service delivery and institutional capacity building challenges that they confront, should public servants additionally seek to change the polity and society? Perhaps sometimes they should. Tumultuous societal transformations can produce conditions that eventually, when the dust has settled, enable public servants to accomplish their missions more effectively. During the 1940s and 1950s effective service provision to African-Americans required exercise of technical competence, as also was true for serving others. But honing proficiencies and enhancing organizational capacities would not have substituted for achievement of America’s Second Reconstruction. In addition to addressing moral wrongs, the momentous changes engendered by the Civil Rights Movement contributed to the public service’s effectiveness. Arguably, educators seeking to inspire Black children, social workers struggling to assist fractured families, and public health workers were among those whose missions became easier to accomplish after the load that ‘Jim Crow’ laws imposed on Blacks and the nation was lifted.

Restrictive federal immigration laws currently reflect, and also reinforce, nativist views widely shared by non-immigrants, just as segregation laws once buttressed various other manifestations of anti-Black racism. Passage during the 1960s of laws prohibiting exclusionary practices did not eliminate racism, but did eventually lead many White Americans to adopt fairer, less biased attitudes. Similarly, successful integration of stigmatized immigrant groups into American society may require, among other things, both enactment of legal reforms and modification of public attitudes. In the meantime, as immigration-related controversies swirl around them, local governments make policies and public servants undertake challenging missions.

Symposium Articles

This symposium’s first article addresses a pressing local service delivery challenge. In “Local Government’s Role in Health Care for Undocumented Immigrants: Three Counties in North Texas” Richard K. Scotch and Sai Loganathan describe differing ways that urban Dallas County, suburban Collin County, and suburban/rural Ellis County address a state mandate that counties provide health care to the indigent. Many individuals requiring such assistance are undocumented immigrants. Scotch and Loganathan describe ways that col-

laborative arrangements with non-profit clinics have sometimes enabled counties to “leverage volunteer time and donations, provide services in a cost effective manner, and often build on the trust and cultural competence of community based organizations” (p. 21). Such collaborations have also reduced use of more costly hospital-based emergency care and “may reduce (although not eliminate) some of the political baggage associated with service provision to undocumented immigrants” (p. 22).

Development of institutional capacity enables public and non-profit entities to serve effectively for extended periods. Institutional capability can consist not only of the ability to deliver services, but also of capacity to perform other valuable functions. In “Barriers to Immigrant Engagement with Government Policy Actors: Perceptions from Immigrant Non-Profit Organizations in California and New York State” Shawn Teresa Flanigan examines nonprofits that have been “founded by members of a specific immigrant group with the primary goal of serving members of the same group” (p. 64). In theory, such organizations can also potentially communicate immigrants’ needs to government officials, but Flanagan found that immigrant non-profits’ ability to do so was inhibited by obstacles.

In “An Analysis of State level Immigration and Inequality over the Last Two Decades: The Case for Aid to State Governments” Thomas E. Lambert examines an aspect of fiscal federalism from a social equity perspective. Examining U.S. states, he finds strong covariance between the sizes of their immigrant populations and both the business profitability and economic inequality that they experience. Lambert interprets those findings as supporting arguments for federal aid to state and local jurisdictions, to help those entities serve immigrant populations. States have disincentives that discourage them from carrying out redistributionist policies, so Lambert suggests that the federal government provide immigration-related financial assistance to them.

Another national challenge is attaining comprehensive reformation of the nation’s immigration laws. During the years leading up to the “Great Recession” (December, 2007 to June, 2009) the size of the nation’s unauthorized/undocumented immigrant population grew substantially, generating wide-spread perceptions that current laws were ineffective and required revision. Intense controversies developed, however, about what types of reforms should be enacted, preventing Congress from passing Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) bills in 2006, 2007, and subsequently.

Christine Thurlow Brenner’s contribution to this symposium analyzes one response that immigrant incorporation advocates have made to Congress’ failure to enact CIR. In “Punctuated Equilibrium and the Immigration; the Executive Order States” she describes integration initiatives underway in five progressive states: Illinois, New Jersey, Washington, Massachusetts, and Maryland. Brenner observes that some states are especially “predisposed to consider change and respond to voices that are calling for a recognized role for the immigrant in the civic and political life of the nation,” while other more conservative ones, such as Arizona and Oklahoma, have enacted restrictive, anti-immigrant measures (p. 26, 40). Brenner suggests that state level immigrant integration initiatives can produce tangible, local results and also potentially influence national policy making. State endeavors have stimulated coalition building by immigrant rights advocates while simultaneously attaining instrumental outcomes such as protection of day laborers from abuses, expansion of

immigrant access to public postsecondary education, referral of immigrants to public and non-profit service providers, and preparation of Legal Permanent Residents to become Naturalized Citizens. Whether or not such state initiatives, along with other forces, will eventually generate passage of CIR remains to be seen.

Nativism Complicates Administration

Anti-immigrant sentiment prevents many U.S. natives from extending full societal acceptance to members of some immigrant communities, impeding their integration. In addition to making life difficult at times for immigrants, nativism often affects the labors of policy makers, public managers, and non-profit administrators. Examples of such complications appear repeatedly in this symposium. Examining provision of health care to indigent people living north of Dallas, Scotch and Loganathan found that "...the issue of public funds being used for services to undocumented individuals is never far from the surface of the very conservative context of Collin County politics. State and local elected officials from the county are often challenged to declare their opposition to such funding, and few are willing to stand up to such challenges." (p. 20). In 2007 newly elected Collin County officials admonished clinics to limit use of county funds to serving legal U.S. residents. Subsequently, three of nine non-profit service providers declined to accept grants from the County and other clinics did not use all of the funding allocated to them. From 2007 to 2008 indigent care spending through those grants dropped from \$299,988 to \$218,913. This illustrates how nativist pressures sometimes impact administrative efforts to deliver services to vulnerable populations.

Findings that Thomas Lambert presents here can be used to support proposals that the federal government provide assistance to states and localities to help them effectively serve immigrants, furthering their equitable integration into society. Such programs are unlikely to be vigorously undertaken, however, while public discourse about immigration remains dominated by nativist themes. In her contribution to this symposium Christine Brenner describes how negative images of immigrants, including those disseminated by conservative media hosts, have obstructed Congressional enactment of Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR).

Because nativism impacts their work, public servants should develop an understanding of its origins and character. As the second decade of the 21st century begins, anti-immigrant hostility is frequently directed against Muslims, Mexican-Americans, and other Latinos. Anglo-American antagonism towards Latinos is not a new phenomenon. In *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds; Mexican Immigration and the Future of Race in America*, Gregory Rodriguez examines the histories of Mexico and the American Southwest, chronicling a century and a half of Anglo-American ambivalence about Mexican-Americans. He demonstrates that Anglo-Americans have been racializing and demeaning Americans of Mexican origin since at least the mid-1800s (Rodriguez 2007). Today open expression of racial and ethnic prejudice is less socially acceptable than it was previously, so related sentiments are often presented as dissatisfaction about the presence in the United States of "illegal aliens".¹ Ironically, although immigration policies affect individuals and communities drawn from throughout the world, contemporary debate focuses almost ex-

clusively on the status of the nation's unauthorized immigrants, a group currently estimated to number eleven million persons (Passel and Cohn, 2010). That population is frequently stereotyped as consisting entirely of poorly educated, criminally inclined people from Mexico who impose costs on society but who cannot be successfully assimilated into it. Despite its components' demonstrable falsity,² this stereotype inhabits the popular imagination, negatively affecting not only its ostensible targets but others as well. Distinctions between U.S. Citizens, Legal Permanent Residents, and 'Illegal' [Unauthorized or Out-of-Status] persons are not universally understood. In much of the nation Latinos from other countries are routinely perceived to be 'Mexicans' and U.S. born Latino school children are taunted by classmates to "Go back to Mexico". Meanwhile, immigrants from other continents are enmeshed in an extremely complex, imperfect immigration system that Congress, paralyzed by vocal opposition to 'illegal immigration', appears to be unwilling or unable to reform.

Images and Narratives Shape Policies

Anthropologist Leo Chavez (2008) has documented the presence of a "Latino Threat Narrative" which, although based on false premises, is promoted by both mass media organizations and anti-immigrant groups. Negative narratives affect both policy making and societal equity. In *Deserving and Entitled; Social Constructions and Public Policy*, Ann Schneider and Helen Ingram (2005, 16-17) observe that, "There is nothing benign about the tendency people have to construct divisive, value-laden differences between themselves and the "other" – who becomes the object of disdain. The damage is especially acute when these differences become embedded in public policies." Building on Ingram and Schneider's framework, Lina Newton (2008) has documented ways that narratives about "good immigrants" (often legislators' own European ancestors) and 'bad immigrants' (newcomers perceived to be threatening or unworthy) shaped Congressional immigration policy making from 1984 to 2006. Public servants should be cognizant of ways that their words and actions either convey respect for immigrants, as part of positive narratives, or reinforce societal divisions. When negative imagery denigrating immigrant groups is replaced by more positive narratives in public discourse it becomes easier for officials to enact, and administrators to implement, policies supporting immigrant integration.

Sources of Public Confusion

In addition to nativist pressures inflamed by 'threat narratives', there is an additional challenge that public servants confront concerning immigration, the presence of public befuddlement, widespread confusion about the causes, character, and effects of contemporary immigration. Just as immigrants traverse strange new lands, natives within host societies sometimes find themselves living in disorienting social terrain. In many ways early 21st century American life is quite different from that which unfolded in the mid-20th century. Many Americans, including this writer and nearly all of the nation's current leaders, grew up during an exceptional era when immigrants' role in national life was more limited than it had been previously or would become subsequently.

Growing up in a small, rather ethnically homogeneous Ohio town, this writer first learned about immigrants from hearing older people speak of them and from reading about

them in books. In 1962 he and other seventh graders were told by their American History teacher, "We don't need immigrants any more." Immigrants, the teacher said, deserved credit for having built the nation earlier, but they were no longer required after the frontier closed in 1890 and then factories became mechanized. Having read how early twentieth century immigrants had performed society's most demeaning, unpleasant, and dangerous jobs, a student asked the teacher who would perform those jobs during his lifetime. The teacher responded, "When you grow up machines will do everything for us." This prediction has not been realized. In 2011 American factories, repair shops, and food processing plants still require the exertions by many workers possessing strong backs, arms, and fingers. As they have done for decades, magazine writers continue to predict that homes will soon be cleaned robotically, while real world residences, commercial buildings, and institutional spaces continue to be maintained by human beings. Robots do not yet repair roofs, serve dinners, wash restaurant dishes, change bed pans in nursing homes, landscape public spaces, or shovel manure out of the stalls of Kentucky's Thoroughbred horses.

It is easy now, with hindsight, to identify gaps in the history that this writer was taught during the nineteen sixties. Even as Anglo-American teachers proclaimed that immigrants were no longer needed, Spanish speaking migrants harvested vegetables in Northern Ohio vegetable fields, Mexican immigrants labored in Chicago and the Southwest, and Cuban refugees were transforming Miami into a thriving international metropolis. Such developments were, however, perceived by many other Americans to be exceptional events, merely peripheral parts of the national story. During the mid-20th century many people believed that American communities, especially those in the nation's "heartland", could continue prospering indefinitely without receiving inflows of immigrant workers. The national economy was growing while immigrants' societal role declined. By 1970 only 4.7% of the U.S. population was foreign born, a historic low. Back in 1910, 14.7% of the population had been foreign born. After 1970 the foreign born percentages would rise again, reaching 11.1% in 2000 (Daniels 2004, 5).

Most Americans value the substantial increases that have occurred since the 1920s in their living standards, educational levels, and life expectancies, but few acknowledge that those developments have revived the nation's need for immigrant labor. From the nation's founding until the early 20th century anti-immigrant bigotry was commonplace but coexisted with widespread recognition that immigrants were needed to settle and construct the nation, the belief that "Immigrants Build America". Then, during the early 1920s national leaders concluded that immigrants were no longer required economically. So, they severely restricted immigrant entry, legislating their prejudices. Restrictions enacted during the 1920s were followed by a "Nativist Free Ride" that lasted until the late 1970s or early 1980s. Mechanization of agriculture, massive internal migrations³, broader employment of women, and the baby boom were *extraordinary one time events* that enabled the American economy to grow for decades without receiving much inflow of immigrant labor. Then, a new era quietly began in 1981, the year that the last baby boomer turned 18 and left home for college or work.

During recent decades the United States' aging population has been in an 'Age of Denial', a delusional time marked by many natives' unwillingness to acknowledge either im-

migrants' renewed economic value or their basic human rights. As heirs to the Puritan belief that they are an exceptional people, many Americans are reluctant to admit that prosperity and educational advancement have reshaped their personal predispositions and those of their children, grandchildren, and neighbors. In culturally Calvinist America hard work is considered to be a Godly virtue. So, Americans are reluctant to acknowledge that for them, just as for other peoples around the world, individuals' willingness to perform dirty, difficult, and dangerous jobs diminishes as their incomes and educational levels rise. Most Americans today want their children to be educationally and occupationally successful. Few desire that their offspring's high school and college successes will lead them into enduring careers as dish washers, cement workers, roofers, hotel maids, meat packers, or migratory farm workers. However, lacking cultural self-awareness and recognition of economic realities, some lash out at stigmatized, unfamiliar "others".

Toward a Better Meta-Narrative

Costs that working class immigrant populations impose on states and communities should not be discussed unless consideration is simultaneously given to positive economic benefits that those immigrants generate for particular jurisdictions. The Perryman Group (2008) has developed economic models estimating how much additional employment, personal income, and gross product unauthorized immigrants add to the economies of each of the fifty states, while the Fiscal Policy Institute (2009) has described the contributions immigrant workers make to the countries twenty-five largest metropolitan areas. But, compelling as careful analyses and statistical evidence are to scholars, elected officials and members of the public often respond more favorably to compelling stories. How can immigrants' economic contributions be conveyed effectively to local leaders? Perhaps this can be accomplished by disseminating narratives about individual immigrants' accomplishments. Such imagery needs to buttress an improved national meta-narrative that recognizes that immigration offers solutions to national dilemmas. In addition to portraying immigration as a solution rather than a problem, such a meta-narrative should acknowledge assimilation's inter-generational inevitability, thus assuaging some native fears. Working within positive frames of reference, governments, non-profit organizations, and individual natives of receiving communities can all help immigrant assimilation unfold positively, over time.

Christopher Daniel is Professor of Public Administration at Kentucky State University. His scholarship and service address challenges that working class Latino immigration poses for Kentucky's public service. Most of his previous work addressed human resources management issues, including management of diverse workforces. In 2005 Dr. Daniel co-founded "Educating Latinos for Kentucky's Future", a non-profit organization devoted to expanding educational access to an underserved population. He can be contacted at christopher.daniel@kysu.edu.

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Notes

¹ Diverse considerations, prominently including both racism and ethnocentrism, have motivated American immigration restriction since at least the 1880s. For details see: Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door; American Immigration Policy and Immigrants Since 1882*, 2004, Hill and Wang.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has documented racist aspects influential contemporary restrictionist organizations and activists, focusing attention on *the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR)*, *U.S. Inc* and other groups affiliated founded, funded, inspired by Michigan ophthalmologist John Tanton. See: "The Puppeteer" at: <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2002/summer/the-puppeteer> .

Contemporary nativism is portrayed more favorably by Samuel Huntington in *Who Are We; Challenges to America's National Identity*, Simon and Schuster, 2004, pp. 295-35.

² Once of the best journalistic works succinctly refuting anti-immigrant (and anti-Mexican) stereotypes is: Jason Riley, *Let Them In; The Case for Open Borders*, Gotham Books, 2009.

A nuanced, contemporary scholarly perspective on assimilation is presented by Telles and Ortiz (2010). See also Perryman Group (2008) and Rumbaut (2009).

³ The ‘Great Migration’ of Blacks from the rural South to northern and western cities transformed the nation socially while providing labor supporting expanding local economies. Other internal, mid-20th century migrations included population flows out of Appalachia and movements of U.S. Citizens from their native Puerto Rico to mainland cities.

