

Boston College Immigrant Integration Lab
April 2, 2013

Good morning, and thank you for having me -- I think.

Few topics are as important, as compelling or as inspiring as the integration of immigrants into mainstream American life.

At the same time, few topics are as maddening these days. If I have any hesitation about addressing this topic today, that's why.

Of course, the immigrant story is deeply rooted in the American story. It's not a recent chapter in that story either. We often hear about the phenomenal influx of immigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries; but limits on immigration to the colonies was one of the grievances against King George listed in the Declaration of Independence. We were a Nation of immigrants from the start, what Walt Whitman called a

"teeming Nation of nations." Immigrants have always enriched and enlivened America.

It shouldn't surprise any of us. Ours is the only nation in human history not organized around a common language or religion or even culture. Instead, we are organized around certain civic values. And we have defined these values over time and through struggle as equality, opportunity and fair play. Because these values transcend race, ethnicity, religion and other differences, because they defy dogma, we have always been a beacon for seekers and strivers from around the world.

Of course the ideal is elusive. The playing field is hardly level. Our history is littered with examples of dogma trumping democracy. Even today we pledge our allegiance to the foundations of equality while the gap between the haves and the have nots grows. In a land of opportunity we belittle some

who seek the chance to marry whom they love or the children of undocumented parents who seek a chance to go to college and improve their ability to contribute to the common good. John Kennedy wisely observed that “American society is a process, not a conclusion.” That doesn’t mean our ideals have no currency. It means that part of the miracle of America is the conscious struggle to close the gap between our reality and our ideals.

Immigration is integral to that process. Newcomers renew and replenish our culture and our economy like a fresh spring. Welcoming new Americans reminds us of our ideals.

Sadly, much of today’s immigration debate is sour. The language is often toxic and dehumanizing, riddled with intolerance and even racism. It’s also widely detached from the facts.

So, let's spend a couple minutes looking at the facts:

We have 38 million people born in other countries living in the United States. Some are citizens. Some – like my own son-in-law -- are here on green cards. They are working, paying taxes, serving in the military, creating jobs, innovating, discovering, raising families.

Their role in the economy can't be underestimated. Immigrants co-founded 26 percent of the biotech companies in our state. Go to Wall Street. Forty percent of all publicly traded venture-backed companies in high tech manufacturing are started by immigrants. Those numbers translate into American jobs.

For every 100 STEM workers who came to the U.S. for advanced degrees, 262 American workers are employed. Disaggregate the STEM factor, and even the U.S. advanced

degree, and 100 immigrant workers still produce 44 American jobs. That's good for America.

Immigrants fill labor gaps in every sector. By 2030, 76 million baby boomers will leave the workforce. Only 46 million native-born Americans will join it. Do the math. We need immigrants.

Immigrants are already making up the difference. They're on the young side too, so they'll spend more years in the workforce. Stephen Moore from the CATO Institute -- hardly a liberal bastion -- estimates that the total net benefit of immigrants to the Social Security system will reach \$500 billion by 2022 and \$2 trillion by 2072. In other words, immigrants are contributing WAY more than they will ever see in return.

And I know some people don't want to hear this, but undocumented workers contribute, too. Social Security assumes that about three-quarters of undocumented workers pay payroll taxes -- boosting the Social Security coffers by seven billion dollars each year. And those workers will never receive benefits.

Now, this isn't a rationale for maintaining the status quo in the way we as a country deal with undocumented immigrants. It's simply a point of understanding in a debate that offers so little.

Right now, all over America, there are 11 million people living in the shadows. One million of them are children brought here by their parents. Despite some of the current rhetoric, they didn't sneak in to America, in some cases risking life and limb, for a driver's license, welfare benefits or

free health care; indeed, many come from places where it's easier to get those things than it is here.

No, they are here for the same reasons many of your ancestors came: for equality, opportunity and fair play. They came here for the American Dream.

I was struck by President Obama's recent speech to 2,000 young Israelis in Jerusalem. Urging them to seek peace with the Palestinians, he said, "Put yourself in their shoes. Look at the world through their eyes." We could use some of that thinking when it comes to the undocumented in this country.

Here is what I find to be the maddening part of today's debate. Demonizing immigrants is a denial of who we are as Americans. Call it the dark side of assimilation. In our quest to make America our own, we sometimes lose the precious

sense of yearning that put us on that boat or that train or that dusty, unforgiving highway in the first place.

That's the very kind of amnesia that led to literacy tests...quotas...internment camps...and violence. Awful violence.

But the understanding necessary for developing rational approaches to illegal immigration lies in that yearning. It lies in remembering that the quest in the human heart for equality, opportunity and fair play is profound and unstoppable. It's America's enduring strength – and frankly, our competitive edge. Our society is too dynamic to yield to narrow-mindedness and intolerance.

Thankfully, the stars seem to be aligning in Washington on comprehensive immigration reform. The American people are paying close attention. Just last week, a poll found

Hispanic voters viewing Congress more favorably than does the overall population – 56 percent versus 30 percent.

Pundits credit the bump to Congress's movement on this issue. That's a language people in politics understand.

In my view, a centerpiece of any agreement has to be a clearly defined path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. And this path must be earned. That means undocumented immigrants have to pay taxes and penalties, pass national security and criminal background checks, learn English and get in line behind legal immigrants waiting for citizenship.

But even those channels need reform. Getting a visa to come to the US today takes too long and is too unpredictable. That needs fixing. Let's also make it easier for talent to stay...conduct research...create businesses...employ Americans. I like the President's image of "stapling" green

cards to the diplomas of science, technology, engineering and math Ph.D. and master's graduates at U.S. universities. Let's make it easier to keep families together – including same sex couples – by eliminating backlogs. And let's pass the DREAM Act, so kids brought here by their parents, and only know America as their home, can have the same opportunities as those born here. That's morally right...and exquisitely aligned with our country's civic values.

As I said, by law and convention, Washington has the lead role in this debate. But states can still contribute constructively to the national conversation.

The President's recent decision to defer deportation of undocumented children brought here by their parents is a great example. That change in federal policy enabled our Board of Higher Education, under existing state law, to start offering these students the same tuition rates at our public

universities as their peers. If they grew up here...went to school here...and matured into responsible college applicants, then I believe they should have the same access as everybody else to the next rung on the education ladder – the rung that will lead to productive citizenship.

You see...giving all children access to a quality education starting in their earliest years ensures their success – and ours. It is the cornerstone of the American Dream.

We happen to know a few things about education in Massachusetts. We know early childhood education pays huge dividends for kids and for our community as a whole. We know that more time in school increases the likelihood of going to college. And we know that reading proficiency by the third grade is a key indicator for future academic success.

Kids lacking these and other advantages can fall behind. They become trapped in the achievement gap. I am passionate about closing this gap. We CAN do it – if we dedicate the purpose and the resources – because you know what else we know? We know who these kids are...where they live...what schools they're learning – or not learning – in. You know who they are too.

The students I am talking about are predominantly kids of color. Some are dealing with disabilities. Many are immigrants or the children of immigrants just learning English. A disproportionate number of them live in what we call our Gateway Cities. Places like Brockton and Lowell. Pittsfield and Springfield. Lawrence and Fitchburg. These are places of stubborn economic and social challenges, but they are also places of hope.

That's what I see when I visit schools...ESL classes...and job training centers in these communities. I see people eager to write their own chapters in this great American story.

As future social workers, you will be seeing these families in the not-too-distant future. And if you are logging hours in the Immigrant Integration Lab, you are developing the skills and sensibilities to help immigrants better grapple with the challenges of living and working in a new society. I thank you for that.

I never tire of the stories. I had the good fortune of hiring a woman from Mexico as head of personnel and administration in my office. Carmen Arce left her family in Mazatlan to come here for graduate school. She studied law and diplomacy. She worked hard. She met a nice guy. Her surname is now Arce-Bowen. They started a family.

Just the other day, Carmen took her citizenship test. She was given 10 random questions. The second one made her giggle: “Who is the Governor of your state?”

Needless to say, she got the answer right. But the moment was not lost on her. Seven years after arriving here, Carmen was proud of the life she had built. She reflected on the opportunities of her adopted home, and she came to the conclusion that we all come to, whether we arrive here by birth...by boat...or even by the brutality of slavery. And that is:

The American Dream is more than the stuff of legend or folklore. It is real. And it is especially real in the lives of Carmen and other immigrants. You can't separate the American Dream from immigration. Nor would we want to. Our future depends on it.

Thank you.