

Innovations in Immigrant Incorporation

High Point, North Carolina

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IN THE PAST FOUR DECADES, the South has become a region of economic growth and rapid demographic change, with one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the nation. Between 2000 and 2010, southern states like North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, and Kentucky saw their foreign-born populations grow at or above twice the national rate.

Some state and local governments in the region and nation have reacted by passing restrictive legislation towards immigrants. Alabama's

2011 immigration law was one of the most notorious. But an increasing number of municipalities are seeking out more inclusive, integration-focused planning—a collaborative process of mutual learning and accommodation involving relationship building and dialogue with immigrants. In the following we show how a group of diverse community stakeholders came together in High Point, North Carolina, to create a plan to enhance immigrant civic engagement, linguistic achievement, and economic and educational advancement.

Building Integrated Communities

High Point, North Carolina, is a city of 104,371 people, with foreign-born residents, primarily from Latin American countries, accounting for over 11 percent of the total population. At the center of High Point's integration efforts is the Human Relations Commission (HRC), which has a long history of work towards inclusivity through diversity trainings, investigation of fair housing complaints, and the organization of city-wide events celebrating local cultural, ethnic and racial diversity. High Point's

nationally acclaimed Student Human Relations Commission, started in 2004, teaches youth about human and civil rights.

In 2009, the High Point HRC applied to a new program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill called Building Integrated Communities (BIC). BIC is a resource for municipalities interested in immigrant integration, started by the Latino Migration Project and the School of Government in consultation with immigrant leaders across the state. At UNC, BIC is staffed by a team of anthropologists, urban planners, and demographers committed to community-engaged research; many have personal experiences with immigration. The authors of this article are part of this team.

BIC enters into partnerships with municipalities that are willing to embark upon a three year planning process involving community needs assessments, relationship building and dialogue with local immigrant leaders. The BIC team at UNC pledges a three year commitment to each partnering municipality to help facilitate meetings and provide relevant research on demography



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and best practices. Importantly, BIC is driven by community partners who define goals and priorities and are responsible for the eventual implementation of integration strategies. The High Point HRC applied to BIC after the UNC team sent an invitation to all municipal governments in the state to participate in the program. In their application, the HRC expressed an interest, through letters of support from the mayor and local organizations, to deepen and diversify their relationships with immigrant residents.

as many sectors of the community as possible and encouraged participation from diverse groups of people. The HRC contacted other municipal government agencies, non-profits, religious organizations, immigrant associations, and businesses in order to leverage existing community resources and ultimately generate locally relevant strategies.

Our first meetings, held in local churches, government buildings, and the city museum, focused on relationship building and education about:

government officials about needs and assets, and then shared materials with participants. We found that High Point's immigrant and refugee communities include people from Latin America, India, Pakistan, Burma, Nepal, Vietnam, Sudan, and Eastern Europe. We also discovered many community assets in religious organizations serving immigrant communities. At one of the meetings, the mayor said, "I sit here and I am awed by the diversity that has come in this room and what a challenge it is to all of us to build a city together."

In the second year, our meetings included the core group plus up to 60 more stakeholders and focused on identifying shared values and prioritizing needs. In sum, more than 100 immigrant residents from 20 different countries participated in these stakeholder meetings. Given the wide range of needs, High Point stakeholders spent much time building consensus over common priorities of leadership development, access to city services and information, and communication between different groups. In many cases, programs existed, but stakeholders agreed that these programs could be more inclusive of immigrants. For example, in High Point, the police department organized community dialogues in neighborhoods across the city, but had not made these events accessible to immigrants. The mayor hosted groups to learn about civics, but had not specifically reached out to foreign-born residents. There were numerous city boards with leadership positions, but few representatives from immigrant communities.



Three Year Planning Process

After signing agreements that outlined roles and responsibilities, the HRC and UNC team embarked upon a three year planning process in High Point that involved in-person meetings with a core group of 10 to 15 local elected officials, immigrant leaders, and other community stakeholders. We realized that this planning process would be more successful if we involved

1. demographic composition of the city;
2. identification of existing community assets, which included making sure that the meetings involved representatives of local immigrant populations; and
3. identifying community needs.

When not meeting in person, the UNC team and HRC staff interviewed and surveyed community advocates, service providers, and

Once the group established these priority areas, the UNC team researched promising integration practices in other parts of the country such as California, Oregon, Colorado, New York, and Chicago, and presented this information to participants over a series of several half-day meetings. Participants then reflected upon the applicability of these practices in their own community. In some cases, mayors in large cities like Chicago and New York had created staff positions devoted to immigration affairs. This practice was not feasible in High Point (and other BIC partnering municipalities) because of budgetary constraints. Politics and history also mattered, and local planners attempting to improve lives for immigrant residents had to work within the constraints of state and local laws. North Carolina laws bar access for immigrants without legal status to higher education, drivers licenses, and in some communities, even the opportunity to receive canned goods at soup kitchens. Local government protocols and policies can also vary by municipality, making strategies developed by one community not necessarily useful in another.

Action Plan

By year three, stakeholders had created an action plan that brought together and built upon strengths of all community sectors present. To date, High Point's Immigrant Integration plan consists of 16 different initiatives aiming to promote integration in ways that will benefit the entire community and provide

learning opportunities for receiving communities and newcomers. Specifically, they are designed to enhance immigrant leadership, civic engagement, language acquisition, cultural competence, and access to services. Two of the most important aspects of this plan are an International Advisory Committee, an official body of immigrant leaders charged with advising city leaders of their communities' needs, and an Interfaith Advisory Committee,

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a group of international faith leaders responsible for improving relationships between newcomers and receiving communities. Other initiatives include an urban garden-

ing project to enhance immigrant entrepreneurial opportunities, public tours of city departments, improved access and awareness about parks and recreational spaces, and the creation of a language and cultural guide for city staff and service agencies. The city will also explore centralizing its interpretation services to save agency costs and hosting public bus tours to improve access to the public transportation system. The Human Relations Commission is expanding its monthly community dialogue series to focus on issues concerning immigrants and refugees and to build cultural understanding. They will host focus groups with immigrants to explore how they can improve access to leadership positions and increase representation on city boards, and invite consultants to provide expertise in this area. Finally, planners will incorporate cultural diversity of new immigrant groups into the city's annual festival.

Lessons Learned and Challenges

As authors, we offer some reflections about the BIC process based on lessons learned working in High Point and other partnering municipalities. While the goals, strategies and outcomes have varied according to stakeholders in each municipality, all locales have followed a similar collaborative and comprehensive process. Compared to other integration efforts underway nationwide, the content of BIC community initiatives in High Point and other North Carolina locations is not exceptional. Indeed, action plans in each locale have been informed

by promising and successful practices from municipalities across the United States and beyond.

What is less common about the BIC process is the combination of: 1) the collaborative methods used to adapt these promising practices to suit North Carolina municipalities and 2) the use of a comprehensive approach in the context of new immigrant destinations in the South. BIC community integration plans are comprehensive largely because the planning process involved idea sharing from many different sectors within communities. According to in-depth reviews of practices nationwide, few municipalities of similar size undertake such collaborative and comprehensive approaches. Comprehensive approaches appear most frequently in more populated areas, perhaps because these strategies are more resource intensive and thus are more easily sustained. Comprehensive plans tend to provide both the depth of specialization and the breadth of cross-city collaboration. They may also involve policy changes and mechanisms for sustained community feedback and collaboration. The creation of immigrant advisory boards or task forces—an outcome in two of the BIC partner municipalities—is expected to add sustainability by institutionalizing a body that will share ideas and fortify relationships, perhaps achieving a similar level of comprehensiveness to programs found in larger urban areas. One positive aspect of working in smaller municipalities is that it was logistically easier

for stakeholders to engage in the face-to-face meetings necessary to build personal working relationships to achieve community goals.

Collaboration with such a great diversity of people from different sectors of the community, nationalities, races, ages, and religions can present challenges. Communication is critical, and Human Relations staff found it necessary to arrange for interpreters at many meetings, which doubled the meeting time. Even though the UNC team worked in communities that already had strong networks with immigrants, we found it necessary to work with stakeholders to prepare before planning even began. For example, in one community, immigrant newcomers requested education about the functions and agencies of local government, while local officials requested more information about immigrant backgrounds and needs. The UNC team found that participants wanted to be more involved in conducting research about community needs in the beginning, requiring additional time to organize more focus groups and interviews. At every meeting, facilitators from the UNC team made a concerted effort to include time for relationship building by including meals and breaks. Another challenge was the long planning time period necessitated by such a comprehensive process—almost three years, in fact, in all communities. Collaborators sometimes found it challenging to sustain participation over time and

make sure that at each meeting participants were up to date on the latest developments. To address this challenge, the UNC team provided summaries of progress at each meeting and written materials of all research and information to date. Regular email communication and follow up after meetings helped sustain energy during the process. The UNC team also found it helpful to connect all of the human relations commissions in the different communities we worked in so they could share strategies.

Acknowledging immigrants as valuable community assets opens the door to new ways of addressing economic growth, conflict resolution, and social cohesion. Even in a national and regional context hostile to immigrants, the experience of High Point shows that members of small communities can come together to build relationships and create inclusive programs. Local action is not a replacement for federal immigration reform, but while the country awaits comprehensive reform, these efforts offer a promising model for communities of good will. **P²**