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<td>Corresponding Author</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td><a href="mailto:ambise@alaska.edu">ambise@alaska.edu</a></td>
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<td>Author</td>
<td>Buckingham</td>
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<td>Email</td>
<td><a href="mailto:sbuckingham@alaska.edu">sbuckingham@alaska.edu</a></td>
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Recent years have seen an increased flow of skilled immigrants around the globe. Increased migration is fueled by a constellation of factors, among them, improved flow of information, transportation, and international connectedness. Skilled immigration has also been driven by the recognition of the contributions that skilled immigrants make in spurring innovation and international competitiveness, as well as social and economic revitalization of their new communities. To this end, some countries and communities within them have embarked on policies aimed at attracting, training, and retaining skilled immigrants. Yet, true integration and inclusion of skilled immigrants remain a major challenge for most communities, in part related to the communities’ own policies, practices, and lack of programming that result in the exclusion and marginalization of immigrant residents. Many immigrants find themselves locked out of critical opportunity structures that would enable them to make vital contributions to their new communities and countries. Some skilled immigrants struggle to fully join the workforce in their areas of specialty and further advance their training due to lack of acceptance of their academic achievements and credentials earned in other countries, language barriers, lack of information and support to navigate the employment and educational systems, social isolation, and/or discrimination. Situated within the larger framework of the “welcoming” initiatives around the globe, this chapter highlights community efforts in Anchorage, Alaska, United States, to describe steps made toward sustainably integrating and fully including a growing immigrant population in the municipality and tackling underemployment or “brain waste” of skilled immigrants.
| Keywords (separated by “-”) | Immigration - Integration - Inclusion - Welcoming Cities - Skilled immigrants - Anchorage - Alaska |
Welcoming Cities: Skilled Immigrant Integration and Inclusion in a United States City

Amana Mbise, Sara Buckingham, Tzu-Chiao Chen, Shannon Kuhn, Nyabony Gat, and Mara Kimmel

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Abstract

Recent years have seen an increased flow of skilled immigrants around the globe. Increased migration is fueled by a constellation of factors, among them, improved flow of information, transportation, and international connectedness. Skilled immigration has also been driven by the recognition of the contributions that skilled immigrants make in spurring innovation and international

A. Mbise (*) · S. Buckingham · T.-C. Chen
University of Alaska Anchorage, Anchorage, AK, USA
e-mail: ambise@alaska.edu; sbuckingham@alaska.edu; tchen3@alaska.edu

S. Kuhn
CDC Foundation, Anchorage, AK, USA

N. Gat
South Central Alaska Area Health Education Center, Anchorage, AK, USA
e-mail: nyabonyg@alaskapca.org

M. Kimmel
Far North Consulting, Anchorage, AK, USA

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Keywords
- Immigration · Integration · Inclusion · Welcoming Cities · Skilled immigrants · Anchorage · Alaska

1 Introduction

High-skilled immigration – that is, the migration of people with at least a post-secondary diploma or degree to another country (Kaushal & Fix, 2006) – is beneficial for the countries and communities to which these immigrants migrate. In the United States (USA), high-skilled immigration creates jobs, raises wages, revitalizes communities, and keeps the country globally competitive (Global Detroit, 2016). However, immigrants frequently face barriers to being fully included and integrated into their new communities and thus are able to fully contribute to them. Given the vital role that immigrants play in the communities where they create their new homes, a number of cities across the USA have begun to explore and modify their policies, practices, and programs in order to capture the “untapped talent” within their immigrant communities. These Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs are vital strategies for municipalities to attract and retain diverse talent in their communities, in both the public and private sectors (Greater Des Moines Partnership, 2021).

This chapter describes skilled migration around the world and to the USA in particular. Efforts made toward not only attracting diverse talent, but also retaining new immigrant community members and creating equitable spaces in which they are fully included and integrated into community life are examined via a “welcoming”
framework (Welcoming America, n.d.). The chapter illustrates these principles through the work undertaken by the Municipality of Anchorage, a small city in the far Northwestern US state of Alaska, to better integrate and equitably include their growing immigrant population. Lessons are drawn from the Municipality’s Untapped Talent Project, a multi-actor initiative to identify priorities, develop plans, and implement new policies, practices, and programming for immigrant inclusion and integration to become a more welcoming community.

2 Background

Over 258 million people, or 3.4% of the world’s population, live outside their country of origin, with nearly two-thirds of this group being people who have migrated for employment opportunities (United Nations, 2020). These figures already surpass an earlier projection made in 2003 for the year 2050, which was 2.6% or 230 million (United Nations, 2020). This trend is projected to continue for many years to come, fueled mainly by advances in technology, transportation, economic issues, demographic factors, and climate change, as well as social and political instability in certain regions of the world. Although the Asian and European continents are home to the largest number of immigrants (approximately 80 and 78 million, respectively), North America follows, with almost 59 million immigrants. In North America, the USA is home to the vast majority of immigrants to the continent (50.7 million). The USA has been a primary destination country for immigrants since the 1970s, with its immigrant population more than quadrupling in the past 50 years. Today, the USA has the highest proportion of immigrants in relation to its total population in the world, at approximately 16% (United Nations, 2020). India, Mexico, and China contribute the highest numbers of people who have migrated around the globe (17.5, 11.8, and 10.7 million, respectively); many of them go to the USA for employment opportunities (United Nations, 2020). The USA is home to the largest number of high-skilled immigrants in the world (Connor & Ruiz, 2019).

3 Labor and Economic Migration

Mobility is a permanent characteristic of human life that occurs within or across national borders. International migrants leave their countries of origin for numerous reasons to improve their living situations. A variety of circumstances (e.g., unemployment, poverty, war, danger, isolation) push people to leave their countries of origin while other circumstances (e.g., employment opportunities, social mobility opportunities, political security, safety, social networks) pull them to enter new countries (Lee, 1966). A substantial portion of international migrants have been forcibly displaced from their homes; approximately 25.9 million people around the world are refugees, asylees, or asylum-seekers, representing 10.1% of all international migrants. Nearly 60% of the international migrant population is classified as
migrant workers, or those moving to other countries primarily for employment opportunities (United Nations, 2020). Often, these immigrants move more voluntarily than others, driven by aspirations of better economic opportunities in the new countries where they will make their lives and homes, and they frequently have some education and skills necessary to enter the labor market of their new countries and communities. According to analyses conducted by the United Nations’ International Organization for Migration (2020), immigrants, regardless of their immigration status, tend to have “higher entrepreneurial activity compared to those born in the receiving country and, in countries such as the United States, have disproportionally contributed to innovation” (p. 6).

4 Attracting Skilled Immigrants Globally

The global rise in high-skilled immigrant migration has received much attention in recent years. Increased migration is due, in part, to more countries acknowledging the contributions of skilled immigrants toward innovation, improvements in information technology, improved global migration management, and global connectedness, which have simplified the movement of skilled labor (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020). In turn, this has led to more high- and middle-income countries developing policies to attract, retain, and integrate high-skilled migrants into their workforces and communities at-large (Batalova et al., 2016; Kaushal & Fix, 2006). Many of these high-skilled immigrants work in sectors with high demand for specialized skills, such as information technology, finance, engineering, medicine, and other sectors that are experiencing workforce shortages (OECD, 2020). In Canada and Australia, for example, high-skilled immigrants comprise more than one-third of the countries’ information technology and finance sectors, thereby making high-skilled immigrants a critical part of their economies (OECD, 2020).

Although the international flow of migrants has slowed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have continued to accelerate efforts to attract and retain high-skilled immigrants particularly in sectors that are deemed essential (OECD, 2020). These new efforts include, among others, relaxing special requirements to attract and retain high skilled workers; expanding the lists of Specialty Occupations (the United Kingdom); allowing employers more freedom to hire foreign skilled workers (Ireland and Belgium); attracting and retaining more international students, and expanding pathways to permanent residency (Canada) (OECD, 2020). In the USA, a federal bill has been proposed to allow for adjustment of status for immigrants who are essential workers (117th Congress, 2021–2022).

Immigrants have made significant contributions to the USA (United Nations, 2020). High-skilled immigration in the USA creates jobs, raises wages, revitalizes communities, and keeps the country globally competitive (Global Detroit, 2016). According to Schulte (2020), nearly 9 million US-born people are employed at immigrant-owned firms in the country; nearly 262 jobs are created for every 100 international graduates working in the fields of science, technology, and
mathematics (STEM); and, 50% of billion-dollar valued start-ups have an immigrant founder. Moreover, immigrants start businesses at nearly twice the rate of US-born people (Schulte, 2020). These positive contributions of immigrants are slowly being acknowledged among a growing segment of the population and are already working to shift public perception of Immigrants (Connor & Ruiz, 2019).

In spite of the previous federal administration’s efforts to limit immigration, for the first time since 1965, more US-born people have said that they want more, not less, immigration (Younis, 2020). Nearly eight in ten US-born people support encouraging highly skilled people to immigrate and work in the USA (Connor & Ruiz, 2019). Yet, this public sentiment is not always coupled by policies that seek to welcome immigrants nor create favorable working and living conditions for them. For instance, despite 14.7 million of immigrants ages 25 and older having an advanced degree and technical skills in the USA (Connor & Ruiz, 2019), many find themselves locked out of critical opportunity structures that would enable them to make vital contributions to their communities. The result has been high rates of skills underutilization – what has been termed “brain waste” (Batalova et al., 2020, p. 4) – as immigrants work in jobs that are not aligned with their expertise and skills. In addition, nearly two million immigrants in the USA are considered unemployed or underemployed, often due to their education and credentials gained outside of the country not being recognized; the problem is particularly notable in the healthcare sector where nearly 60% of the underemployed workers have foreign credentials (Batalova et al., 2020).

5 Integration and Inclusion of Skilled Immigrants

Ensuring that immigrants are recognized as an integral part of their new countries is a critical first step toward both immigrants and nonimmigrants reaping the full benefits of immigration. Within the context of a plural society, integration implies a two-way process where the new country ensures that the rights of newcomers are in place in order to facilitate a smooth participation in the social, economic, and political life of the community they join (Entzinger & Biezeveld, 2003). Successful integration is, therefore, both a function of characteristics of the immigrants themselves and factors in their new communities (Kyeremeh et al., 2021). Unfortunately, many immigrants face barriers that prevent their full participation in the economic, social, and political life of their new communities (Jimenez, 2011).

At the structural and community levels, factors such as policies aimed at promoting labor market participation, economic opportunities available, language programs, and inclusive and welcoming attitudes toward immigrants on the part of longer-term residents are important determinants (Kyeremeh et al., 2021; Remennick, 2003, 2012; Entzinger & Biezeveld, 2003). Even where governments pay lip-service to the benefits of high-skilled immigrants to their communities and countries, their policies often diverge from the values they espouse. Restrictive rules with regard to immigration processes and work permits serve as barriers to not only immigration, but also inclusion and integration (Erkut, 2016). Likewise, xenophobic
attitudes, fears of losing jobs to foreigners, racist and discriminatory remarks, and direct threats against newcomers from the general populous are common in countries such as the USA, and play a critical role in further isolating newcomers from participating as equal members of their new communities (Erkut, 2016; Kyeremeh et al., 2021).

At the individual level, factors such as the levels of education, language proficiency, age, migration status, and individual motivation, also play a role in immigrants’ integration into their new communities (Entzinger & Biezeveld, 2003). For example, the ability to communicate in the country’s primary language(s) is essential to finding employment, navigating social and cultural life, accessing services such as health, education, and seeking help where needed (Lochmann et al., 2019). While immigrants’ integration is often a shared goal between immigrants and their new communities, integration is not synonymous with inclusion. The underlying assumption of an integrationist framework is that newcomers are different and adaptation into the mainstream society is required to “fit in” (Meisner & Heil, 2020). On the other hand, an inclusion framework treats newcomers as equal members of society and seeks to actively transform the systems and structures that exclude newcomers from their full participation in the community. Making a distinction between integration and inclusion is important for us to begin to fully understand the different experiences of immigrants and refugees (Aspire, 2017). For example, while an integration framework may describe the integration of immigrants into the labor market, it falls short of explaining the overrepresentation of immigrants in low-paying jobs, the concentration of immigrants in segregated communities, and the experience of discrimination and racism (Carter-Thuillier et al., 2017). Whereas integration derives from a functionalist view of society, which does little to problematize inequality (Meisner & Heil, 2020), an inclusion framework seeks to interrogate such disparities and holds the receiving community accountable for making the kind of changes that promote the full participation of newcomers as equal members of society.

While integration and inclusion is multidimensional, crossing all sectors of societies, this chapter focuses on socioeconomic integration and inclusion as a particularly impactful dimension. Socioeconomic integration is perhaps the single most important measure of immigrant integration and determines how immigrants will fare in other dimensions (Jimenez, 2011). Indeed, employment is often cited as a gateway to successful integration and inclusion of skilled immigrants into a new country (Wilson-Forsberg, 2014). This is because, through their workplaces, immigrants meet other community members, upgrade their professions, establish friendships, improve their proficiency in the language(s) of their new communities, as well as develop cultural skills necessary to navigate their new communities (Wilson-Forsberg, 2014; Remennick, 2012). However, this is only possible if skilled immigrants are able to enter the labor market of their new countries and find and maintain work that matches their skills and education.
6  Contexts of Reception Across the USA

The integration and inclusion of immigrants varies widely across the USA, where federal immigration policy has not changed significantly in three to four decades. In spite of stagnant federal policies, as aforementioned, immigration has increased significantly across the nation in the same time period. Local and state governments have taken a more active role in immigration-adjacent policies for a number of reasons including: (a) the immigration policy stalemate at the federal level, (b) the charge of some responsibility for subnational jurisdictions to both enforce immigration laws and ensure the welfare of immigrants in their jurisdiction built into the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and Welfare Reform Act, (c) immigrants increasingly settling in localities that had not had large immigrant populations in the past, and (d) population loss and economic decline in localities around the USA (Christopherson et al., 2010; Huang & Liu, 2018; Varsanyi, 2008, 2010).

While policymakers outside of the federal government cannot directly legislate immigration policies that involve the selection, admission, settlement, and deportation of foreign citizens residing in the country” (Bjerre et al., 2015), they can and do enact policies that impact the lives of immigrant community members, namely, related to their integration and inclusion in the broader community. For example, since the 2000s, states have introduced and passed hundreds of immigration-related bills, ordinances, and resolutions annually (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018). Likewise, municipal governments have also enacted laws that shape daily life for their residents, while some have enacted laws requiring local cooperation with federal law enforcement on deportation, others have passed policies that remove barriers to opportunities for all residents regardless of immigration status, promoting both access to critical municipal services as well as expanding the socioeconomic potential of their municipalities (Huang & Liu, 2018; Ramakrishnan & Wong, 2010; Walker & Leitner, 2011).

In addition to producing policies that promote a “context of reception” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2014), these practices can reinforce values of belonging and democratization through ensuring that the voices of all residents are better integrated into fundamental community decisions. These values are vital to the long-term economic, social, and cultural well-being of cities throughout the USA and are fundamental to the mission and work of building welcoming communities.

7  The “Welcoming” Movement

In the past decade, many local governments throughout the USA have begun to adopt policies that integrate immigrants into the economic and social fabric of their communities. As described earlier, research supports the notion that inclusion policies stimulate the economies of their new communities (McDaniel, 2014; Peri, 2010; Strauss, 2012). At the same time, restrictive, exclusionary policies can block immigrants’ contributions across all aspects of community life. Recognizing this,
Welcoming America, a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, was launched in 2009 to “lead a movement of inclusive communities becoming more prosperous by making everyone feel like they belong” (Welcoming America, n.d.). Much of the work of Welcoming America is to build a network of communities dedicated to immigrant integration and inclusion. Just 4 years after they began, Welcoming America started their “Welcoming Cities and Counties” initiative to provide a space for communities to share ideas and resources. Today, one in eight Americans live in a “Welcoming Community” (Welcoming America, n.d.). Welcoming America states that, “Just as fertile soil is needed for a seed to grow, welcoming communities foster a culture and policy environment that makes it possible for newcomers of all backgrounds to feel valued and to fully participate alongside their neighbors in the social, civic, and economic fabric of their adopted hometowns” (Welcoming America, n.d.).

The initiative spurred by Welcoming America has quickly spread to other parts of the globe, with countries across Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, Canada, and Mexico participating, many with their own Welcoming Cities networks. In the UK, for example, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Liverpool, and Peterborough are all founding cities in their nation’s “Inclusive Cities” network (University of Oxford, n.d.). In Australia, 51 communities, representing 30% of the total population, participate in “Welcoming Cities” (Welcoming Cities Australia, n.d.).

## 7.1 Welcoming Communities

On the one hand, participation in the Welcoming networks can be seen as largely symbolic, demonstrating a commitment to immigrant integration and inclusion. However, in 2016, Welcoming America outlined what they called a “Welcoming Standard,” core guidelines for communities to adopt and implement policies, programs, and partnerships that “give communities the welcoming edge” (Welcoming America, 2016, p. 4). The Welcoming Standard was developed through collaborations of academics, practitioners, business, and civic leaders with input from the general public, reflecting the best available research and practice evidence for immigrant integration and inclusion. It was then pilot-tested in a number of communities, with plans to revise the standards every 5 years. Communities that follow these guidelines are able to become “certified” by Welcoming America through an application process and then a self-assessment followed by an in-person audit from Welcoming America staff. Certificates are valid for 3 years before a community must undergo another in-person audit (Welcoming America, 2016). The standards are currently undergoing additional revisions that reflect the knowledge gained over the 10 years of Welcoming practices and policies.

To engage in the Welcoming network, local communities must meet certain baselines, including (a) creating partnerships between long-term residents and newcomers (i.e., immigrants), fostering connections, developing sharing values, and promoting mutual belonging; (b) identifying goals and priorities, and continuously monitoring and evaluating those goals and priorities to ensure the community is
meeting them; (c) designing programs and partnerships to facilitate equity and inclusions across cultures, ages, genders, sexual orientations, races, ethnicities, religions, and physical and mental abilities; and (d) collaborating across sectors in a way that engages new partners and also strengthens existing community support for immigrant integration and inclusion (Welcoming America, 2016).

Communities then must meet a set of core requirements across seven categories: Government Leadership, Equitable Access, Civic Engagement, Connected Communities, Education, Economic Development, and Safe Communities. For example, within the equitable access category, communities must have: (a) at least one program in place to ensure language access and a comprehensive language access policy across all government agencies to address the linguistic barriers to integration and inclusion aforementioned in this chapter; (b) at least one partnership program to achieve equitable access to health services, housing, transportation, and justice; (c) at least one process in place to identify and address barriers to equitable access to programs and services; and (d) no locally mandated policies with a primary purpose to exclude or disenfranchise immigrants. Readers should note how these criteria map onto many of the barriers to immigrant integration and inclusion discussed at the beginning of this chapter, such as language challenges.

Welcoming International has similarly created a “national standard, set of indicators, or framework” to help guide welcoming efforts in the locality’s policies, practices, and culture. These are organized into five categories: local stakeholder involvement (i.e., co-design of standards by a broad set of immigrant and nonimmigrant community stakeholders), collaboration and partnership (i.e., collaboration across sectors and systems for program implementation), equity, diversity, and inclusion (i.e., design of standards in a way that is responsive to diverse communities with diverse immigrant populations so that programs and policies are equitable and inclusive), integrity and credibility (i.e., following of standards through good practices), and learning and improvement (i.e., continuous evaluation for improvement of standards, policies, and programs).

While the Welcoming America and Welcoming International standards were based on the best available research and practice evidence for immigrant integration and inclusion, little empirical research to-date has explicitly examined the efficacy of the policies and programs welcoming communities put into place. Anchorage, Alaska and its “Welcoming Anchorage” initiative is offered up as a case example of how communities may work toward putting these principles, policies, and programs into practice to endeavor toward true integration and inclusion of immigrants, particularly high skilled immigrants. Anchorage similarly offers a case study examining how welcoming policies can transform community values in ways that enable welcoming values to sustain even as local political leadership can dramatically change.
The Case of Anchorage, Alaska, USA

Anchorage is a port city in Southcentral Alaska located on the traditional, unceded lands of the Dena’ina peoples. While a relatively small city of approximately 300,000, Anchorage is the largest municipality in the state and home to nearly half the state’s residents. As a result of colonization and exploitation from the US government, including incentivized migration of some of the country’s population to Alaska, the majority of the people currently living in Anchorage identify as white even as the city is experiencing rapid growth in other ethnic communities, experiencing in-migration from all over the globe. The city’s growth is largely due to military, transportation, oil, and tourism (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The municipality serves as a service hub for much of the state, with a large healthcare sector and the largest campus of the state’s university system.

International migration to Anchorage has greatly increased, growing from 13,000 in 1990 to 35,400 people in 2018 or 8.9% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The city is home to immigrants from all over the world, with the Philippines, Korea, Mexico, Canada, Thailand, Russia, Germany, and the Dominican Republic most represented today (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The municipality is also home to many refugees and asylees for a city of its size, with the local resettlement agency currently serving people from 28 countries, including Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Bhutan, Congo, Myanmar, Cuba, Laos, and Ukraine (Catholic Social Services, n.d.). The Anchorage School District reports that approximately 20% of its students collectively speak a total of 110 languages aside from English, with Spanish, Hmong, Samoan, Tagalog, and Korean being the most widely spoken languages. Because of its ethno-racial diversity, Anchorage has been described as having some of the most diverse neighborhoods and public schools in the USAs, with many neighborhoods exceeding the ethno-racial diversity found in New York City neighborhoods and the average elementary school being more than twice as diverse as the average US elementary school (Farrell, 2018). Like many cities across the country, however, Anchorage neighborhoods and schools are still somewhat segregated due to legacies of housing discrimination and other segregationist policies (Barnett & Hartman, 2018). Integration, as described earlier, is not analogous to inclusion.

Research supports the reality that immigrants play a crucial role in the economic, cultural, and entrepreneurial life of Anchorage. Approximately 30% of immigrants in Anchorage are considered high-skilled, possessing at least a bachelor’s degree, and another 27% have had some post-secondary education and training (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In other words, immigrants in Anchorage have comparable educational levels to their US-born peers. Immigrants are overrepresented in the employed labor force in Anchorage, and particularly in STEM, recreation, and accommodation, healthcare and social assistance, retail trade, and transporting and warehousing industries (New American Economy, 2020). Immigrants are also more likely to start new business than US-born people in Anchorage and represent a greater share of the self-employed population. Collectively, immigrants and refugees contribute approximately $1.9 billion to the city’s GDP and hold 7.3% of the municipality’s spending power (New American Economy, 2020). However, barriers to employment in one’s
areas of education and training still persist. The recognition of such barriers contributing to inequity helped spur the MOA’s endeavor to join Welcoming America.

8.1 Welcoming Anchorage

It was in 2014 that the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) joined Welcoming America as a welcoming community. At the time, the MOA was experiencing an influx of newcomers and began to recognize the potential positive impacts of such growth. The conditions were ripe to join a growing national network of similarly situated cities around the country. Huang and Liu (2018) found that municipalities with a greater immigrant share of the municipal population, greater fiscal well-being and the centralization of their economy, more Democratic-affiliated voters, greater density of immigrant-serving and immigrant advocacy organizations, strong elected leadership, and larger population sizes are more likely to participate in the Welcoming Cities and Counties initiative.

The Welcoming Anchorage initiative took deeper root in the MOA when a core group of institutions and partners came together to activate the values of belonging and inclusion as part of enhancing the city’s economic, social, and cultural promise. A partnership between the Alaska Institute for Justice (a rights-oriented organization), Catholic Social Services’ Refugee Assistance and Immigration Services (the state’s sole refugee resettlement center), the Alaska Literacy Program (an English literacy program), and Bridge Builders (a cultural inclusion and connection-focused organization) and municipal leadership, such as the First Lady of Anchorage, championed the project bringing it to life.

As a critical starting point, Welcoming Anchorage created a core team of partners that included the Anchorage Economic Development Corporation, the Anchorage School District, the Anchorage Museum, and local businesses and organizations. In their initial steps, this new partnership facilitated the municipality’s first strategic inclusion plan, which identified core pillars to support policies of inclusion: equitable access, which particularly involves language access and addressing other barriers to community services for people of diverse backgrounds; civic engagement, which includes an annual Welcoming Week, civic engagement academies, community-wide diversity events, and other civic community partnerships; connected, safe, and healthy communities, which involve the promotion of public safety, law education, and developing the cultural competence of service providers; education, namely, “cradle to career” opportunities, including childhood and adult education along with language learning; and finally, economic development and entrepreneurship, principally addressing barriers to entry into careers across sectors and promoting entrepreneurship opportunities.

8.1.1 High Skilled Immigrant Integration and Inclusion in Anchorage

Because the MOA’s Welcoming Anchorage strategic integration and inclusion plan identified economic and entrepreneurial development as a top priority, the municipality decided to partner with the University of Alaska Anchorage to conduct
community-based research to uncover the diverse education, skills, and experiences among the city’s immigrant and refugee populations, along with barriers and facilitators into the workforce. The strategic planning process and research also identified that the city lacked workforce development services tailored to newcomer populations.

In response to the research findings, Welcoming Anchorage took a variety of steps to enhance economic opportunities for skilled immigrants. Working with the Anchorage Community Land Trust, Welcoming Anchorage supported the creation of “Set Up Shop” – an entrepreneurial training program based on a model created by the Neighborhood Development Center in Minnesota. Set Up Shop provides critical resources to low-income entrepreneurs in the form of startup capital and mentorship, and includes tailored opportunities for limited English proficient Alaskans, many of whom are immigrants.

Likewise, in 2019, Anchorage joined a cohort of 24 cities as part of World Education Service’s Skilled Immigrant Integration Program (SIIP) to build opportunities for skilled immigrants seeking to enter the healthcare workforce. WES is a nonprofit organization whose work includes training programs to help skilled immigrants fully utilize their education and skills via partnerships with institutions and community organizations (WES, n.d.). SIIP’s goal was to work with cities to better integrate the skills and talents of immigrants into their economies. Their technical assistance includes web-based training; hands-on coaching, advising, and technical assistance; monthly calls in which participating communities share ideas with one another; and an annual conference (WES, n.d.).

As part of this work, Welcoming Anchorage supported the Alaska Literacy Program’s “Peer Leader Navigator” program. This program, designed to promote health equity, trains community members from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in physical and behavioral health and healthcare along with disaster preparedness to promote health and care access throughout the community. This partnership became critical during both a 7.1 magnitude earthquake that shook the city in 2019 and the current COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases, the municipality worked in partnership with its SIIP partner organizations to reach limited English proficient residents and provide vital information and access to resources expeditiously.

Welcoming Anchorage set their three primary goals within the SIIP as: (1) Enhancing and developing partnerships and pathways for newcomers into healthcare careers; (2) Adapting a healthcare pre-apprenticeship training for English Language Learners; and (3) Surveying new community members regarding their experiences navigating education, housing, economic development, and social places to identify facilitators and barriers to integration and inclusion in the municipality.

Untapped Talent. To accomplish its third goal of identifying facilitators and barriers to integration and inclusion in the municipality, Welcoming Anchorage and Southcentral Alaska’s Area Health Education Center examined how other communities had gone about gathering similar information in their communities. They then reached out to researchers at the University of Alaska Anchorage to seek
consultation on study design and collaborate on these efforts. In a series of meetings, the collaborators outlined our goals, method, and processes, following community-engaged research principles (Balls-Berry & Acosta-Pérez, 2017). Such research processes join partners with unique skills, knowledge, expertise, and experience; help overcome distrust between community members who have been marginalized and minoritized and those conducting the research; and ultimately enhance the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the data collected and results that can be gleaned from it (Mikesell et al., 2013). Given the stated goals of the community entities, this unique university–government–community partnership determined that a sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Ivankova et al., 2006) would likely achieve goals more effectively; that is, a survey would be used to gather data from a wide range of immigrant community residents as originally planned, but it would be followed by a series of focus groups with community members to better understand the results that arose in the quantitative data. In that way, the team could better identify barriers and facilitators to integration and inclusion and understand what they look like in practice. Moreover, the team could understand if facilitators and barriers diverged across groups (e.g., by age, time in the MOA, English proficiency, culture, etc.) in order to target mechanisms of change effectively.

The collaborative team then examined similar surveys administered in other SIIP cities in order to answer the questions at-hand alongside relevant empirical and practice literature. In a joint effort, the team then crafted a survey that included questions adapted from similar surveys to Anchorage, empirically based measures such as the Immigrant Integration Index (a measure of psychological, social, economic, political, linguistic, and navigational integration) to allow for tracking progress over time, and questions developed by the team. The finalized survey was then brought back to many Welcoming Anchorage partners for review and pilot testing, modified according to feedback on its utility and ease of use. The survey was finally translated into the most common languages spoken in Anchorage and distributed through community partners. Funding to incentivize survey participation was provided through the University of Alaska Anchorage’s Center for Community Engagement and Learning, and funding for translation was provided through the MOA. The team then put forth the proposed protocol to the University of Alaska Anchorage’s Institutional Review Board. The survey itself was made available online via Qualtrics and participants could use a smartphone, tablet, or computer to answer the survey, either their own or one provided by the research team. At the conclusion of the survey, participants could also indicate interest in participating in a future focus group to share more about their experiences.

As the research team neared the time for data collection, team members worked with many community partners to develop and implement a strategy for participant recruitment that would allow all members of the community to participate. For example, while the gold standard of research is generally to use random selection, Martinez and colleagues (2012) contend that using this sampling method with immigrant populations can “lead to considerable and potentially insurmountable obstacles.” This is partially because many immigrants are not included in the US
Census or other public access database, and also because immigrants often experience a number of barriers and obstacles that are not as frequently faced by US-born people, which might make some immigrants wary of engaging with strangers. Consequently, a stratified snowball sampling strategy was used to locate participants. The team held informational meetings with community partners and worked with them to identify ways of most effectively recruiting participants. Participants were recruited primarily through the research team in partnership with immigrant community members and others in community programs that serve immigrants (e.g., the Alaska Literacy Program), and at settings that attract a diverse array of people. When talking with potential participants, the research team explained the project and its intent, answering any questions participants had to normalize and demystify the research process as much as possible before going through the process of informed consent.

Participants were also able to suggest others who might be interested in participating who had different or similar experiences, and provisions were made for those not literate in one of the languages of the survey to respond to the questions aloud or through an interpreter. While such flexibility can potentially add variability into the study, the team determined that it was most important to include all community members who were interested in participating. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic began shortly after data collection commenced and so the team quickly transitioned to online-only recruitment from the in-person work previously employed, using a variety of means, including social media, to get the word out about the survey. Work also continued with community partners remotely and the team held a community “share back” mid-way through data collection to report on the progress of data collection and encourage further participation.

As quantitative data collection came to a close, the team then moved toward the qualitative phase of the project. Using results from the quantitative survey, the team crafted a series of open-ended questions that would help to identify barriers and facilitators to integration and inclusion and understand what they look like in community members’ daily lives. Following a review from community partners and incorporation of probes and follow-up questions, the team finalized the semi-structured interview protocol that would be used to guide focus group discussions. Because the pandemic was still impeding daily life, the team determined that they would hold focus groups on Zoom, a video-conferencing platform. The second phase of the project was then reviewed and approved by the University of Alaska Anchorage’s Institutional Review Board. The team held another informational session with community partners on Zoom to inform on the purposes and processes of the focus groups, and sought their support in helping to recruit participants who had not already participated in the survey. Focus groups were then organized by language and scheduled at each community partner’s convenience. The research team began focus groups with English-speaking participants, with the research team member most experienced with facilitating focus groups on electronic platforms facilitating the first group, another team member taking notes and observing to learn to facilitate the groups, and a third team member listening to the audio recording of the focus group to transcribe the groups. Facilitation was then transitioned to other
team members as they became comfortable with the process. As the full team became more comfortable with the protocol, focus groups in other languages took place through professional interpreters at the Alaska Institute for Justice’s Language Interpreter Center. As of March 2021, ten focus groups have been conducted in seven different languages.

Qualitative and quantitative results are now being combined to produce a more complete picture of immigrant integration and inclusion in Anchorage to make relevant recommendations. While analyses are still ongoing, preliminary results reveal that immigrant community members are more integrated in certain domains than others, and that integration varies by time in Anchorage, time in the USA, education, and age. While many immigrants feel included across the Municipality of Anchorage, numerous barriers exist to accessing community services and being involved with community life, including in the school system and with the government. While the municipality has made great strides in becoming a welcoming city and many participants expressed deep satisfaction with their lives in the community, the full impact of community initiatives does not appear to be taking place due to, for example, challenges in getting linguistically appropriate information on resources and opportunities out to all community members. The results point to numerous strategies the municipality can implement to develop new initiatives and further the impact of initiatives already underway. Tracking and evaluating the impact of the initiatives through additional data collection in the years to come will allow the municipality to continue to grow and develop.

In this way, Welcoming Anchorage’s SIIP demonstrates how local stakeholder involvement through collaboration and partnership can further equity, diversity, and inclusion in the municipality. By gathering needed data through a collaborative community-engaged process, the MOA can continue its development of credible and integral tailored evidence-based practices to support immigrant integration and inclusion. Further, through university–community collaborations, Welcoming Anchorage is well set up to foster continuous learning and improvement of its standards, policies, and programs.

Additionally, the SIIP project demonstrates one way in which working with community-based partners and organizations can embed these critical values even when those values face incredible challenges. The work of Welcoming Anchorage has weathered dramatic events, including a massive earthquake, a pandemic, and, most recently, a change in political leadership that potentially reorients the policies and practices undertaken by city leadership since 2014. These challenges remind us that building community values of equity, diversity, and inclusion are more than about relying on city leadership to pass regulations and ordinances. It is up to all residents to ensure that we are all part of the democratic process in ways that activate our long-term economic, social, and cultural well-being.
9 Conclusions

Global aspirations for international competitiveness, innovation, as well as social and economic revitalization have led many countries to attract, train, and retain high-skilled immigrants. But these aspirations are not yet matched by efforts to fully include and integrate immigrants as equal members of their new communities and countries. Skilled immigrants encounter various barriers that prevent full engagement in community workforces, advance their training, access information and support to navigate the employment and educational system. Newcomers also frequently experience discrimination, racism, and isolation. Within the USA, a lack of response at the national level has spurred local governments to adopt policies and programs aimed at building more inclusive, diverse, and vibrant communities, supported through a nonprofit organization called “Welcoming America” and its sister organizations around the globe. The Untapped Talent Project with Welcoming Anchorage, a collaborative, multi-actor project in the municipality of Anchorage, Alaska, demonstrates efforts of a small city in promoting the inclusion and integration of its growing immigrant population to address “brain waste” among its skilled newcomers. It also demonstrates local stakeholders’ collaboration and partnership to further equity, diversity, and inclusion; enhance community-university relations; and develop an evidence base for building more welcoming communities.

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752 Welcoming America. (n.d.). Who we are. https://www.welcomingamerica.org/about/who-we-are


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