



**Achieving Equal Opportunity and Justice:
The Integration of Latina/o Immigrants into
American Society**

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GRAND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORK INITIATIVE

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Grand Challenge: *Achieve Equal Opportunity and Justice*

GRAND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORK INITIATIVE

The Grand Challenges for Social Work are designed to focus a world of thought and action on the most compelling and critical social issues of our day. Each grand challenge is a broad but discrete concept where social work expertise and leadership can be brought to bear on bold new ideas, scientific exploration and surprising innovations.

We invite you to review the following challenges with the goal of providing greater clarity, utility and meaning to this roadmap for lifting up the lives of individuals, families and communities struggling with the most fundamental requirements for social justice and human existence.

The Grand Challenges for Social Work include the following:

- Ensure healthy development of all youth
- Close the health gap
- Stop family violence
- Eradicate social isolation
- End homelessness
- Promote smart decarceration
- Reduce extreme economic inequality
- Build financial capability for all
- Harness technology for social good
- Create social responses to a changing environment
- Achieve equal opportunity and justice
- Advance long and productive lives

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Achieving equal opportunity and justice for immigrants requires a concerted effort toward their full and social, economic, and political integration. In 2013, more than 40 million foreign-born immigrants lived in the United States, representing 13% of the population—the largest proportion of whom trace their origins to Latin America. Latina/o immigrants are more likely than other immigrant groups to concentrate in low-income occupations and to experience limited educational attainment, poor health outcomes, poverty, and discrimination. These experiences place Latina/o immigrants and their children at higher risk of marginalization. Their successful integration is one of the most significant challenges, as well as one of the most underrecognized opportunities, for American society.

A two-way process, integration requires that immigrants take the initiative to incorporate themselves into the new society, but it also depends on the opportunities granted to newcomers and on the acceptance of the native-born community. To advance Latina/o integration, we propose an assets-based approach that makes use of cultural capital and advocates for structural opportunities for immigrants. In this paper, we highlight two such initiatives. Social work is well positioned to embrace this challenge. Its emphasis on social justice and evidence-based interventions and its commitment to innovative approaches to address complex social problems places social work at the center of an interdisciplinary effort to facilitate the successful integration of Latina/o immigrants into American society.

Key words: Latino immigrants, cultural capital, integration, assets-based approach, social justice, super diversity, evidence-base.

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BACKGROUND

Families were kept apart because a husband or a wife or a child had been born in the wrong place This system violated the basic principle of American democracy—the principle that values and rewards each man on the basis of his own merit.¹

With these auspicious words, President Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality (Hart-Celler) Act (INA) into law on October 3, 1965, eliminating a system based on national origins quotas and instituting a priority on immigrant skills and family reunification. The law effectively opened up immigration beyond European countries. The decades following the new immigration policy witnessed an unparalleled increase in immigration from Latin America that would transform the social fabric and the identity of America. Latinas/os account for 17.1% of the current U.S. population, up from 3.5% in 1960, and are expected to reach 28.6% by 2060 (Stepler & Brown, 2015).

Most Latinas/os, seven out of 10, come from Mexico, constituting not only the largest group of Latino immigrants, but also the largest immigrant group in the country. Other predominant Latin American countries of origin are Puerto Rico, Cuba, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Colombia (López & Patten, 2015). Since 2000, both a decline in immigration, mostly from Mexico, and high birth rates among Latina/o immigrants in the United States, have led to a nativity shift in the composition of the Latino community (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014). Currently, about two-thirds of the Latino community are native-born citizens. A significant proportion of these citizens are children growing up in immigrant-headed households (Stepler & Brown, 2015).

THE SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION OF LATINA/O IMMIGRANTS IS A COMPELLING CHALLENGE

In this paper, we follow the Census Bureau (2012) and define Latinas/os as those who identify themselves (and their children) as having origins in “Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, or another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.” Although Latinas/os are very diverse in terms of origin, race, education, socioeconomic status, immigration pathways, and degree of acculturation, 50 years after the enactment of the INA, significant numbers still face a system that limits opportunities for their integration. This system includes disparities in access to education and health care, barriers to upward mobility, and systemic discrimination. For these reasons, integrating Latina/o immigrants into American society is a compelling challenge.

Educational Disparities

Foreign-born Latinas/os in the United States are more likely than other immigrant groups to experience low educational attainment and have limited English skills. Over half of Latina/o

¹ Source: *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*. Volume II, entry 546, pp. 1037–1040. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966.

immigrants do not hold a high school diploma (Fry, 2010), and only a third reported speaking English “very well” (Krogstad, Stepler, & López, 2015). Others are fluent in English and hold advanced education degrees. Many move to the United States as young adults, a period when education is crucial to successful integration. Language proficiency and education, especially if obtained in countries of destination, facilitate the integration of immigrants (Semyonov, Lewin-Epstein, & Bridges, 2011). However, English training and education are not easily accessible to Latina/o immigrants, despite the fact that they seek general education and English training more than any other immigrant group in the country (Calvo & Sarkisian, 2015). In addition, a substantial number of immigrants who are fluent in English and hold advanced education degrees find that their human capital is undervalued and experience difficulties transferring their foreign educational degrees (Batalova, McHugh, & Morawski, 2014).

Health Care Disparities

Despite high rates of employment, lack of employer health benefits and unaffordability of insurance premiums make Latina/o immigrants the most likely group in the country to lack health insurance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Although Latina/o immigrants tend to have a more favorable mortality rate than other immigrant groups (Markides & Gerst, 2011), lack of educational and occupational opportunities and inadequate access to health care result in substantially higher rates of chronic conditions such as diabetes, liver disease, or HIV/AIDS (Cowie et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).

Economic Opportunities

Latina/o immigrants tend to concentrate in economic sectors characterized by intense physical labor, low compensation, and lack of benefits, which makes them more vulnerable to poverty. Latino families are almost three times more likely than non-Latino Whites to live below the poverty line, and have more children and older adults living in poverty than any other group in the country (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014; Lichter, Sanders, & Johnson, 2015). The poverty rate for Latino families is especially troublesome because immigrant parents do not access social welfare programs to which their children are entitled. This causes already impoverished families to be food insecure, lack health care, and fall into increased poverty, all of which has lasting developmental consequences for their children (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco 2011; Yoshikawa, 2011; Zayas, 2015).

Systemic Discrimination

Latina/o immigrants are exposed to systematic discrimination and exclusion stemming from their ethnification as an unauthorized group. There are an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States (Passel et al., 2014), and almost 80% are Latino (Rosenblum & Ruiz Soto, 2015). The negative and unfounded portrayal of undocumented immigrants as criminals and terrorists and the blending of documented and undocumented

immigrants in public discourse have led to increased discrimination against Latinas/os. Undocumented immigrants face additional barriers to integration given their ineligibility to housing, health care, education, and employment services, the stigma associated with their immigration status, and the fear of deportation (Waters & Gerstein Pineau, 2015).

EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT INTEGRATION IS POSSIBLE: THE NEXT DECADE PROVIDES GREAT OPPORTUNITIES

Health Care Policy over the Next Decade

The enactment in 2010 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) promised to be a defining moment in the integration of Latina/o immigrants through equal access to health care. Making health insurance affordable was the cornerstone of the legislation. To achieve this goal, the ACA established health insurance exchange marketplaces, where moderate-income people could purchase their own private insurance. It also expanded Medicaid, a federal/state joint program, to subsidize the coverage of people aged younger than 65 years with incomes below the federal poverty level. The eligibility increase was intended to provide poor working-age individuals with low-cost access to health care regardless of income, disability, family status, or other criteria to access Medicaid prior to the ACA. Although the original provisions of the ACA intended that all authorized Latina/o immigrants benefit from the Medicaid expansion, a 2012 Supreme Court ruling made the expansion optional for states (Rosenbaum, 2011).

Since the enactment of the ACA, the working-age Latina/o uninsured rate has decreased from 36% to 23% in states that expanded Medicaid eligibility. By contrast, in states that have decided not to expand Medicaid eligibility, there has been virtually no change in uninsured rates among Latina/o immigrants (Doty, Blumenthal, & Collins, 2014). Most low-income Latina/o immigrants that live in these states fell into a *coverage gap* and remain uninsured. They earn too much money to qualify for Medicaid under current state eligibility, yet not enough to purchase private coverage through insurance exchanges. Over three quarters of the nation's 10.2 million eligible uninsured Latinas/os live in states that have not expanded Medicaid (Garfield & Damico, 2015; Gee, 2014). Additionally, unauthorized Latina/o immigrants and recent arrivals (i.e., less than five years in the country) are excluded from coverage under the 1996 welfare and immigration reforms, which did not change under ACA (Marrow & Joseph, 2015).

Although the ACA has made great strides towards health equality, it does not ensure universal coverage. The next decade provides an opportunity to expand health care to Latina/o immigrants that still lack access to this basic right. Lack of universal access to health care is of concern for the successful integration of Latina/o immigrants as inhibits immigrants use of preventive health care and heightens their financial stress as they must pay out of pocket for their health care costs (Chavez, 2012). Latina/o immigrants are currently younger and healthier than other groups in the country but lack of preventive care and financial insecurity will increase their need of acute medical care in the coming decades. Thus, providing access to health care to all in the next decade could contribute to the integration of Latina/o immigrants not only by increasing

population health, but also by preventing the development of complex and expensive health conditions that may decrease the efficiency of the U.S. health care system (Tarraf, Vega, & González, 2014).

Educational Policy over the Next Decade

Educational policy is another crucial aspect for integration of Latina/o immigrants. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), a federal/state partnership to provide adult and workforce education, may play a critical role in the next decade to promote the upward mobility of Latina/o immigrants. The implementation of WIOA could be especially beneficial for the advancement of vulnerable segments of the Latina/o population, (i.e. those without a high school diploma and with limited English proficiency), as it stresses access to information and services provided by the American Job Centers to the foreign-born population (McHugh & Morawski, 2015).

Access to education is also fundamental for Latina/o undocumented youth. The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) of 2007 was the first response to address education for youth without documentation. The DREAM Act (2007) would have provided a lawful pathway to permanent residency and citizenship to youth without documentation after earning a high school diploma. Although the DREAM Act (2007) was not passed, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) of 2012 has permitted students without documentation to stay in the United States for a limited amount of time. Deferred action is an important step in access to education for students without documentation because education provides immigrants with the skills needed for successful integration. Many schools have seen a large increase in their eligible DACA participants and have promptly responded with programs to support these individuals; for example, the Los Angeles Unified School District and the Miami-Dade Public Schools have created online form services and organized trainings for staff on how to complete DACA documents (Hooker, McHugh & Mathay, 2015). Such systems provide Latino immigrants with the necessary structural support to apply for the DACA program.

THE INTEGRATION OF LATINA/O IMMIGRANTS REQUIRES AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

Innovative responses to the needs of today's Latina/o immigrants must go beyond the settlement-house models of the 19th century, when the emphasis was on the development of skills (e.g., language competencies, modest educational attainments) leading to jobs that could provide the wages needed to support a family. In many ways the contemporary context is more complex than it was during previous immigration waves. New communication technologies enable immigrants to maintain stronger ties with their communities of origin. Innovative solutions that employ the assets of modern immigrants are urgently needed, not only for the purpose of promoting their well-being but also because the future health and vitality of the American society may well depend on the success of these newest Americans.

Successful Integration Does Not Mean Cultural Assimilation

The integration of immigrants into the social fabric of American society can be considered a common good, preferable to the alternative of segregation (Nannestad, 2004). The ideological underpinnings of such integration, however, are contested. Behind well intentioned programs may remain assimilationist approaches that assume that conforming to the cultural norms of the American society represents successful integration (Sakamoto, 2007). For instance, in spite of the different social, political, and historical contexts, the experience of Latina/o immigrants, and therefore their *success*, is often compared to the normative non-Hispanic White experience. This approach inadvertently adopts a deficit perspective that focuses on what Latina/o immigrants lack to *become* American (Kasinitz, Waters, Mollenkopf, & Holdaway, 2008), and has shaped much of the “remedial focus” of service models aimed to facilitate the integration of immigrants (Calvo, Rojas, & Waters, 2014).

Assets-Based Models for Successful Integration

In contrast, asset-based models that focus on Latinos cultural capital are necessary for the successful integration of Latina/o immigrants into American society. Such models are particularly important in implementation and direct service delivery, with far-reaching consequences for a range of outcomes. This epistemological approach shifts from a traditional deficit view of Latinas/os to focus on their cultural and linguistic assets (Yosso, 2005).

Considering cultural assets

An asset perspective of the Latino immigrant experience would incorporate innovative approaches to the measurement of integration. For instance, research on the integration of Latina/o immigrants would expand to investigate the role of Latino culture (i.e., *familismo*, *personalismo*, and *respeto*) in the design and implementation of effective social work interventions (Ortiz, Villa, & Bliss, 2015). These constructs form a seamless patterned relationship that is culturally familiar and safe. Ayón and Aisennberg (2010) summarize *familismo* as a close unity of the family, both nuclear and extended and working for its well-being, even at the expense of one’s “individuality;” *personalismo* as connecting with the essence of another through caring and respectful listening; and *respeto* as reflecting the role one plays in close social relationships. Attending to these cultural constructs and providing a space for them in the helping relationship are integral to forming a strong alliance with Latino clients and will likely lead to successful integration outcomes.

Jani, Ortiz, and Aranda (2009) found that effective outcomes were associated with culturally adapted interventions, particularly those studies that embraced the construct of *la familia*. They found, for example, that interventions that included Latino families were successful in increasing proficient diets and breast health among low income Mexican American women (Fitzgibbon, Gapstur, & Knight, 2004); reducing the diabetes risks of preadolescent low-income Mexican American children (Trevino, Hernandez, Yin, Garcia, & Hernandez, 2005); and, increasing the

awareness of HIV and sexual risk behavior among sexually active Latinas of childbearing years (Martin, et al., 2005). These interventions embraced *la familia* as cultural capital recognizing the protective factors inherent in the construct and the importance of family support in using services, increasing knowledge, and changing behavior.

Latina/o immigrants are more likely than other immigrant groups to report low satisfaction with providers of care (Calvo & Hawkins, 2015; Derosé, Bahney, Lurie, & Escarce, 2009). The preliminary results of a metasynthesis of qualitative studies on the perception of Latina women receiving prenatal care show that Latina mothers respond to nonresponsive care, including language inaccessibility, by disengaging from services and not asking questions (Robles & Padilla, 2015). When services are perceived to be accompanied by caring interactions, patients not only feel better understood, but also view information as more believable and accurate. Thus, considering cultural assets is critical to both research and practice. This requires innovation to apply such constructs in effective practice strategies with immigrant Latinos and subsequent generations.

Considering language assets

Language is another key issue in service delivery. The United States is the second largest Spanish speaking nation in the world. The benefits of bilingualism for the development of Latina/o children have been well documented (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2015; Schachter, Kimbro, & Gorman, 2012). Therefore, an assets-based approach for the integration of Latina/o immigrants and their children should focus on fostering and maintaining bilingualism across generations.

Social work's role

In seeking to build bridges and overcome barriers, social work is challenged to meet the human needs of this growing community. Reflecting the community served, expressing openness, and demonstrating commitment with language and cultural expertise are among the greatest challenges of the profession. The market for trained social workers is growing both in domestic work and international social work; therefore, an efficient workforce that can promote the integration of this population is essential for receptive services.

Latina/o Leadership within Latina/o Immigrant Communities

Another innovative approach to immigrant integration comes from within the Latina/o immigrant community. Across the diversity of the third sector—nonprofit, nongovernmental, and other voluntary organizations—Latino leadership is well established. Though increasingly visible in the arts, media, and business, the human service sector has a particular need for representation as it seeks to both reflect the clients served and develop future leadership inclusive of America's largest minority. For successful integration, Latina/o leadership from within Latina/o communities must occur at local, state, and national levels.

An example of Latina/o leadership at the local level

At the local level, small cities like Fitchburg, Massachusetts, have become new destinations for Latino communities. Local agencies have begun to adjust, but Latina/o leadership has made the biggest impact in meeting community needs. For instance, the Latina/o led United Neighbors of Fitchburg (UNF) has addressed the three primary integration pillars: linguistics, civic and economic opportunities, and partnerships with existing municipal leadership and structures. Along with UNF, the community developed their own *comité de vecinos* (i.e., neighborhood committee) to actively engage their programs and to work with state advocates to further develop resources that include easily overlooked populations like theirs outside the major cities. In partnership with Welcoming Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA), UNF holds welcoming events to bring together immigrants and nonimmigrants to learn about each other.

An example of Latina/o leadership at the state level

The Latina/o leadership at Welcoming Colorado created an ad campaign aimed at community acceptance of newcomers and moving against hate language and misunderstanding of the foreign-born. Such Latina/o led programs provide the community with new resources, social cohesion, and patterns of inclusion that have economic and civic benefits for the whole state population.

An example of Latina/o leadership at the national level

At the national level, the Latina/o led National Council of La Raza is heard regularly in Congress and across national media. Thousands from a diverse network of affiliates from each state attend their annual meetings, contributing to the council's political power and grassroots momentum. Partnering with policymakers, community organizers, and trained social workers can help the National Council of La Raza broaden their services to meet community demands.

New Models of Latino-Focused Social Work Education

Systemic innovations to address the need for Latina/o leadership should also be prioritized in professional schools. Latinas/os in social work are often treated differently than other groups based on visible characteristics, cultural background, and language; they are also more likely to perceive prejudice and discrimination, perform tasks unrelated with their work responsibilities, have larger caseloads and multifaceted cases, and have fewer opportunities for career development and advancement (Engstrom, Piedra, & Min, 2009; Guerrero & Posthuma, 2014).

Pilot programs respond to urgent need of professionals adequately prepared to effectively serve Latina/o communities. Aside from new educational models, the latest available data from the National Association of Social Workers reveals that less than 5% of licensed social workers self-identify as Latina/o (Center for Health Workforce Studies, 2006). This lack of diversity in the

profession stems from the underrepresentation of Latinas/os in social work education. The Taskforce on Latinos in Social Work Education warned about the problem of recruitment and retention of Latina/o students (Ortiz et al., 2007). Yet, current data from the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) suggests that little progress has been made in terms of the number of graduate degrees granted to Latinas/os. Making up 17% of the U.S. population in 2013, Latinas/os represented less than 6% of social work graduates. Latinas/os also represented a small proportion of educators. There has been no significant increase in the number of full-time Latina/o faculty (CSWE, 2013).

The Latino Leadership Initiative

The Latino Leadership Initiative (LLI) at the Boston College School of Social Work recruits students that are proficient in Spanish, especially heritage Spanish learners that self-identify as Latina/o. The initiative has a specific curriculum, taught in Spanish, designed to foster students' understanding of the complexities Latinas/os face when accessing social services and in dealing with providers of care in the United States. The LLI also trains future social workers for self-advocacy and career development. A companion research component, the doctoral Latina/o Research Group pursues a deeper understanding of contextualizing services, addresses particular groups and migratory stresses, and investigates elements that lead away from isolation and marginalization and into social cohesion and civic integration.

THE INTEGRATION OF LATINO IMMIGRANTS REQUIRES AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Social work is well positioned to provide the necessary leadership to achieve equal opportunity and justice, but interdisciplinary collaboration is needed to promote the well-being of Latina/o immigrants and subsequent Latina/o generations. Interdisciplinary research teams that include Latina/o scholars will be able to design longitudinal, comprehensive studies that capture both grand challenges and the challenges of everyday life. Intervention studies—particularly those that reflect the approaches of *participatory action research*—can identify factors that account for variation in the success that many Latinas/os are able to achieve, despite institutional barriers. Without an accurate understanding of the Latino experience, little progress will be made. Furthermore, the integration of Latina/o immigrants into all aspects of society will require that social work leaders work more effectively with colleagues in the health, education, employment, and legal arenas as well as with practitioners in the health and social service sectors.

Understanding the multiple barriers to overcome for first generation Americans to achieve full social, civic, economic and political integration is key for social work to meet the challenge of achieving equal opportunity and justice. Social work fosters an asset-based appreciation of the foreign born, seeing not the political categories or discriminatory characterizations but the “aspiring new Americans” who bring skills, knowledge and competency to the United States. Social workers must foster inclusion in policy and practice in community institutions, from the promotion of bilingualism to hiring practices, from symbols of welcome in signage to recognition of various religious and cultural behaviors. Social workers must develop those skills

necessary to address the prevalent issues of acculturation stress, migratory trauma, loss, lack of social capital and family vulnerability.

Working together, the 650,000 social workers and related professionals in the United States can meet the unmet needs of a population unfamiliar with the U.S. systems, and often ignored in outreach and service planning. In addition to addressing the barriers to the full potential in the social, civic, cultural and political life of America's newest residents, social work can be the catalyst for the development of a cohesive, inclusive, and healthy nation for the generations to come.

CONCLUSION

A significant proportion of Latinas/os share a history of deprivation in the United States. This is the result of the processes of immigration and acculturation and the lack of educational and occupational opportunities, inadequate access to health care, and exposure to discrimination. Furthermore, though high proportions of Latinas/os are in the labor force, poor wages and working conditions result in their constituting the largest percentage of the "working poor" in the United States (Acevedo, 2005). These experiences, along with structural barriers for minorities in the United States, place Latinas/os at risk of marginalization.

The successful integration of Latinas/os has the potential to improve the well-being of American society by increasing the opportunities of one of the fastest growing segments of the population. Social work is exceptionally positioned to address this challenge. Social work professionals have a compelling opportunity to engage other professionals and disciplines in the adoption of innovative assets-based approaches that focus on the cultural capital of Latinas/os and facilitate the true integration of their communities into the social fabric of America.

We propose to approach this grand challenge from an assets-based perspective, one in which Latinas'/os' culture, knowledge, and skills become the foundation of an alternative paradigm that truly fosters the integration of newcomers. In addition, we propose to build this body of knowledge with the collaboration of Latina/o communities, faculty, and allies, as well as with Latina/o social work doctoral students, who constitute the future of the profession. We also see this grand challenge as the ideal opportunity to foster collaboration across disciplines, some of which have more experience than social work in the study of the immigrant experience. The adoption of this approach for the integration of Latina/o immigrants provides a unique opportunity to transform the profession from one that instills normative cultural capital to one that truly promotes social justice.

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