

IMMIGRATION & CIVICS: WHAT EVERY AMERICAN SHOULD KNOW



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
BACKGROUND ON THE IMMIGRATION & CIVICS INITIATIVE.....	5
HOW IMMIGRATION AND CULTURAL LITERACY INTERSECT	6
KEY KNOWLEDGE FOR ALL AMERICANS.....	7
KEY KNOWLEDGE FOR NEW AMERICANS	10
TEMPLATE FOR ACTION	16
RESOURCES.....	17
PARTNERS	18
ADVISERS	19

INTRODUCTION

Immigrants and their United States-born children represent more than a quarter of the overall population of the US. They are our neighbors, colleagues, schoolmates, and friends. It is impossible to embrace the ideals of “We the People” without talking about immigrants; however, debates about cultural literacy and American identity typically omit and ignore immigrant voices and experiences. Immigration & Civics: What Every American Should Know—an initiative created by the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program—intends to address that.

Change can be unsettling. Amid giant demographic and social shifts, and particularly with a rising tide of nativism building in this country, it is more important than ever to foster common knowledge and demonstrate shared values. This initiative is a direct response to the increasing polarization and fragmentation that America currently faces.

Since this project began, the US has witnessed growing hostility toward immigrants both from the federal government and from individual citizens. This antagonism has, understandably, stoked fear among immigrants. Furthermore, in American society today a dangerous narrative exists that those who are not literate in “mainstream” American culture do not belong in this country. We are calling for a direct counter to that narrative. We believe that a 21st century sense of American identity must fully embody the true diversity of our nation’s past and present.

Over the course of a year, the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program team traveled around the country to meet with advisers who represent new Americans. This report aims to share lessons learned on the road in two directions, based on two fundamental questions: What knowledge do all Americans need to understand immigrant experiences in this country? And what knowledge do new Americans need to navigate and acclimate to life in this country?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this report, we discuss key knowledge longtime Americans need to understand immigrant experiences in America:

- As immigrants encounter new experiences when they arrive in the US, they also bring with them cultural identities and histories that are important parts of the makeup of American society.
- The US is massively influential to the rest of the world; this plays an important role in immigration to this country.
- Immigrants contribute to life in America in a multitude of ways, and there is great opportunity to learn from them.

We also explore the knowledge new Americans need to acclimate to life in the US:

- Immigrants must have access to resources and tools to help them navigate a new community—in the US, civics is key.
- Immigrants must be aware of cultural norms that might differ from those of their countries of origin.
- Immigrants should know how to explore the plethora of opportunities that exist in the US; when new Americans can access these opportunities, all Americans benefit.
- Immigrants should know that they can play a vital role in civic life.
- Immigrants should be aware of the complex identity frameworks that are established in the US; they also bring with them their own backgrounds and cultures, which are significant for life in America.

Finally, we identify core action elements to help actors at the local level increase knowledge and understanding among new and longtime Americans. We include a crowdsourced list of resources related to this work.

BACKGROUND ON THE IMMIGRATION & CIVICS INITIATIVE

At the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program, we focus on the challenge of sustaining strong citizenship and coherent national identity in an age of demographic flux and severe inequality in America.

We created an initiative called What Every American Should Know to explore how, in an age of increasing diversity and widening disparity, this country can cultivate a sense of shared identity and common civic purpose. The initiative grew out of a 2014 [essay](#) by our executive director, Eric Liu, in *The Atlantic*. He wrote that amidst giant demographic and social shifts, it is more important than ever to define some common knowledge – cultural, pop cultural, historical, civic facts, memes, and references that every American should know. So, at the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program, we are crowdsourcing ideas from a wide range of Americans by asking the following question: What are 10 terms or references that you think every American should know? We are [inviting submissions](#) in the form of top 10 lists, which then automatically aggregate into a national list of what every American should know.

During our What Every American Should Know conversations, we have heard perspectives on American identity from Americans from all walks of life – both longtime and new residents. However, conversations about cultural literacy and American identity among the general public typically leave out and ignore the voices and experiences of new Americans. A 21st century sense of cultural literacy must be diverse and inclusive of immigrants. So, as our conversations continue across the country, we have launched a new branch of the What Every American Should Know initiative – Immigration & Civics: What Every American Should Know – to ensure that the views of new Americans specifically are a central part of Americans’ shared cultural vocabulary.

This effort is all the more urgent amid the current surge of anti-immigrant sentiment nationwide and the restrictionist policies at all levels of government. We know that having shared values is an antidote to fragmentation. We are in an era of rapid demographic change in which we are questioning in profound ways what it means to be an American. This project explores that critical question—not by suggesting an answer but by inviting both new and longtime Americans into the conversation to build a common foundation of knowledge and understanding.

Over the course of 2017, we convened community-based focus groups with dozens of advisers from across the country who represent immigrants (documented and not), refugees, second-generation Americans, and individuals who work closely with new American communities in many sectors. We met in Washington, DC; Chicago; and San Francisco.

Together, we explored participants’ valuable perspectives on American civic life and culture. Our conversations focused on two fundamental questions: What knowledge do all Americans need to understand immigrant experiences in this country? And what knowledge do new Americans need to navigate and acclimate to life in this country?

HOW IMMIGRATION AND CULTURAL LITERACY INTERSECT

More than ever, Americans are polarizing based on personal worldviews, preferred news sources, and individual interpretations of what are “facts.” The vital connections among the symbols, texts, sounds, places, ideas, and artifacts that make up the fabric of this nation have been lost, to a certain extent. Building a foundation of common knowledge is imperative.

Some of that foundation is based in traditional American systems and values—things like the Constitution, politics, and law—but much of it is newer and more nuanced. Things like pop culture, sports, and current events also make up our shared American identity.

So, we are asking Americans: What knowledge do you need to navigate through life in this country today? The information may be cultural, civic, historic, or political.

In the midst of escalating fragmentation, polarization, and nativism, constant and intentional effort to build and maintain common identity and common ground is critical. *What Every American Should Know* is not intended for only “insiders” or “experts.” This conversation about national identity is owned by all of us, and it is something that we must argue over and work on together to preserve. We must create a sense of cohesion, unifying our communities, to make our democracy more resilient.

New Americans are central to this effort. The rising tide of nativism around the world brings with it anti-immigrant sentiment. Although dangerous everywhere, this sentiment is particularly dangerous to the American foundation and the American experience. Central to the idea of American exceptionalism is that the US is open to diverse people, ideas, bloodlines, and cultural traditions. To have a conversation about national identity and what every American should know, immigrant voices and experiences must be front and center.

This current surge in nativism can partially be explained by the fact that change is unsettling. *What Every American Should Know* aims to make communities more resilient by building common knowledge and demonstrating shared values between new and longtime residents. This initiative intends to promote two-directional learning: to invite immigrants to contribute to this foundation of knowledge so that all Americans can learn from them, and to help immigrants to tap into this knowledge so they can navigate life in a new country.

KEY KNOWLEDGE FOR ALL AMERICANS

We asked our advisers what knowledge all Americans should know to understand immigrant experiences holistically. The following is a synthesis of their recommendations.

CONTEXT AND CULTURE | As immigrants encounter new experiences when they arrive in the US, they also bring with them cultural identities and histories that are important parts of the makeup of American society.

All Americans should be mindful that new Americans are finding their place on a new turf. What might seem obvious to native-born Americans is brand new to some immigrants. Within this context, all Americans must grasp that immigrants frequently endure religious discrimination, xenophobic attacks, undue scrutiny, and instances in which basic human rights are denied.

Changing this behavior requires effort from all Americans, and this change benefits everyone. After all, it is not only new Americans who should feel free from fear. “When a community changes, no one feels like they belong,” said Rachel Peric, executive director of Welcoming America, “and that can contribute to the cultural anxiety that animates nativism. It’s important we acknowledge the challenges of adapting that both newcomers and longtime residents experience, and recognize that demographic change can be an opportunity to make everyone feel at home, and make communities work better for everyone—and particularly since other people of color are experiencing a lot of the same trends that are impacting immigrants, it becomes all the more important that the overarching narrative be about everyone belonging and being free from fear.”

All Americans should understand the influences that new Americans bring with them, and that being a proud American does not require them to abandon their cultures of origin. Immigrants’ native cultures significantly influence many areas of life in the US, notably arts, sciences, and food. In this way, immigrants influence core aspects of American identity. Understanding the real value of these influences is particularly critical in a time when many in our country are calling to “make America great again” by removing them.

All Americans must understand that there is no single immigrant story. For example, Diane Vy Nguyen-Vu, a community liaison for the Office of Community Partnerships in Montgomery County, Maryland, pointed out that for many new Americans, leaving countries of origin is not a choice. It is not uncommon for new Americans to have experienced war and violence, and in some cases they have been forced to leave their homes. According to Abel Núñez, executive director of the Central American Resource Center, a changing phenomenon of immigration flows is occurring, from primarily adult males seeking employment to females or families seeking refuge.

“When a community changes, no one feels like they belong,” said Rachel Peric, executive director of Welcoming America, “and that can contribute to the cultural anxiety that animates nativism.”

Grace Meng, senior researcher in the US Program at Human Rights Watch, also noted that many Americans do not understand that most undocumented immigrants, even when they have family members who are US citizens, simply do not have a path to legal status under current law, and yet they come anyway, often because they are seeking refuge. However, many Americans assume that immigrants are too lazy to complete the steps or too unwilling to pay the fees to obtain legal citizenship.

All Americans should understand the truth about what drives immigrants here and what these immigrants need upon arrival, such as mental health and economic support.

THE US AND THE GLOBE | All Americans must understand that the US is massively influential to the rest of the world, and this plays an important role in immigration to this country

American actions can have direct implications for migration in other areas of the world. This idea is well known to Sindy Benavides, director of civic engagement and community mobilization at the League of United Latin American Citizens. She notes that when the US takes actions in other countries, it is common for the other countries to bear the consequences, while longtime US residents can remain largely unaffected. This can directly influence immigration to the US. Qutaiba Idlbi, a researcher at the

Global Policy Institute, noted that when migration into the US is directly related to US policies abroad, the US must take responsibility for those individuals who are affected. Idlbi added that individuals who most feel the impact of US policies abroad form their opinions about the US through these policies. All Americans should be more aware of the diverse and complex reasons that drive immigration to the US—and the role that the US plays in these reasons.

However, many Americans fail to see the connections between US foreign policy and the immigrant experience. A false narrative exists that says immigrants are here to take, not to give, and policies are built around this narrative. Consequently, not only are immigrants intimidated by negative public discourse about immigration, they also face horrific circumstances, such as being separated from their families and detained indefinitely without explanation.

Negative narratives force counterarguments that aim to prove why immigrants are of value to Americans, building narratives of “optimal” immigrants who have traits that are deemed valuable, such as high-level skills in technology or economics. Leon Rodriguez, who served as the director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services from 2014

to 2017, pointed out that this notion is problematic. He finds this view anti-American and believes that all Americans should understand that the unfolding of the immigrant experience happens over generations. Carlos Guevara, senior policy adviser at UnidosUS, noted that “immigrants successfully integrate over generations, and their identities also evolve. As a result, groups like Latinos and others don’t always see their identities exclusively through the lens of immigration. Over time, other issues, like the economy and health care, become just as, if not more, important in their day-to-day lives and the way they engage in civil society.” Further, as noted by Abigail Golden-Vazquez, executive director of the Latinos and Society Program at the Aspen Institute, “many Latinos were here before there was a United States, and never crossed a border. The border crossed them, or they are born US citizens, such as Puerto Ricans. The immigrant exception does not define Latinos, and yet they are ‘othered.’”

"Qutaiba Idlbi, a researcher at the Global Policy Institute, noted that when migration into the US is directly related to US policies abroad, the US must take responsibility for those individuals who are affected."

IMMIGRANT CONTRIBUTIONS | All Americans should understand that immigrants contribute to life in America in a multitude of ways, and that there is great opportunity to learn from them.

Many US success stories would not be possible without immigrants. Immigrants contribute significantly to innovation and entrepreneurship in the US by starting businesses, creating jobs, and developing technologies. Immigrant groups also make powerful contributions to creative sectors—music, television, movies, art, and more—that are enjoyed by all Americans. As Laurin Bello, program manager for the Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement, noted, “It is not just the big ways that immigrants influence American life that we should be paying attention to. Immigrants contribute in small ways every day, and other Americans should learn from them.” Despite these truths, the current administration and its allies have stoked fear and anxiety about immigrants.

“A quality that makes our nation great is our relentless will to achieve a better life and earn the American Dream,” said Wadi Gaitan, national spokesperson for the LIBRE Initiative. “This quality is especially strong among immigrants who have left everything behind and have bet their entire future, and their family’s future, on an opportunity to build a better tomorrow and contribute here in the U.S. Our nation’s economy, culture, and society are optimized when immigrants are empowered with opportunity to use this quality.”

Immigrants have a set of knowledge about integrating into civic and cultural life that all Americans should learn from. According to Liu, to be an immigrant, fundamentally, is to be able and willing to learn a new map of power, culture, and place—and this trait is at the heart of what it means to be an American. In this way, immigrants are the best civic teachers in America today. We should ask ourselves, what would America be without immigrants?

Laurin Bello, program manager for the Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement, noted, “It is not just the big ways that immigrants influence American life that we should be paying attention to. Immigrants contribute in small ways every day, and other Americans should learn from them.”

KEY KNOWLEDGE FOR NEW AMERICANS

We asked our advisers to share what knowledge someone new to this country needs to successfully navigate life here. The following is a synthesis of their recommendations.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION | Like newcomers anywhere, all new Americans most immediately need access to resources and tools to help them navigate a new community. In the US, civics is key.

New Americans need to know civics—that is, how government and power work in this country. This knowledge is critical for immigrants who must navigate government processes, such as seeking refugee status, asylum, permanent residence, US citizenship, and visas. Civic engagement and understanding is critical for anyone living in this country who wants their voice to be heard. New Americans should know who the key policymakers are, how to get the attention of decision makers, how to defend their rights, and how to advocate for and argue against public issues.

"New Americans must first have a foundational understanding of the American civic creed—values at the heart of our national identity, including liberty, equality, and self-government—and how that creed has been contested and realized throughout US history."

To access these skills, new Americans must first have a foundational understanding of the American civic creed—values at the heart of our national identity, including liberty, equality, and self-government—and how that creed has been contested and realized throughout US history. New Americans need to know that life in the US is not just about the marketplace and economic opportunity; it is also about the challenge and opportunity of living up to this civic creed.

Other examples of practical information that new Americans must know include traffic laws, public transportation, banking, taxes, health care, the legal system, public education, retirement planning, affordable housing, employment training, and the English language. These aspects of US life can present difficulties even for native-born Americans, but they can be especially daunting for new Americans—information that may seem obvious to some may not be apparent to newcomers. For example, for many Americans, going to the bank is a common weekly task, but in some countries, corruption, safety, and lack of institutional integrity prevent people from using banks the way that many Americans use them.

Resources, such as clinics and how-to guides, are widely available in the US to help new Americans adjust. This is not always the case in other countries. In many new Americans' countries of origin, organizational support for this kind of practical information may not be as accessible. New Americans should know that this support exists. According to Peric, more than [40 communities](#) today have "welcoming" plans for incorporating immigrants into their civic, social, and economic fabric, and there are at least 35 municipal offices responsible for this work, which has been a growing trend.

CULTURAL NORMS | To acclimate to American life, newcomers must be aware of cultural norms that may differ from those of their countries of origin.

Some helpful cultural norms for new Americans to be aware of include the weight of time, dress code, the way Americans use names, and appropriate personal space, among others.

Leni Gonzalez, chair of the Virginia Coalition for Immigrant Rights, reflected on the impact of American name norms on her personal identity. Her full name, Maria Elsa Leni González Aceves, was too long for her school's database. Her name was shortened, and the accent was removed, making her "Leni Gonzalez." On the surface, this may appear inconsequential, but it is symbolic of the ways that people are forced to adapt to their new environment. Robin Yasui, a doctor of geriatrics at the University of Colorado Hospital, added that such name changes are not only emotionally significant for new Americans, they also have real-life implications when it comes to government forms, medical documents, and more.

Norms of personal space are also considerably different in America than in much of the world, because Americans tend to leave more space between themselves and others. Núñez pointed out that the way new Americans practice this norm will likely determine how they are perceived.

There are countless examples of these differing cultural norms. Individuals perceive one another based on how these norms are practiced. By understanding these tacit rules, new Americans can avoid miscommunication, open themselves to cross-cultural engagement, and more easily build relationships.

"Name changes are not only emotionally significant for new Americans, they also have real-life implications when it comes to government forms, medical documents, and more."

RECOGNIZING OPPORTUNITY | New Americans should know how to explore the plethora of opportunities in the US. When new Americans can access these opportunities, all Americans benefit.

Examples of opportunities that exist in the US and might not exist elsewhere include using extracurricular activities to build life skills and improve résumés, applying for grants, tapping into various mechanisms for saving for retirement, using education as a gateway to opportunity, and learning what it takes to be an entrepreneur. Understanding and seizing these opportunities allows new Americans to reach their greatest potential—and when this can happen, all Americans benefit.

Michael Iacovazzi-Pau, director of strategic partnerships at the Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement, noted the opportunities in American workforce culture. "The American culture is itself different than cultures of most countries, but the American corporate culture is further defined with sets of standards and expectations. When immigrants enter the workforce to become active citizens, they encounter biases against them or in favor of them, depending on the situation." It is important for new Americans to know things like how to interview with confidence, how to assert individuality, and how to highlight accomplishments and goals—and that these skills are valued in the US.

To use the example of education, new Americans should know that education can be a ladder to economic and social mobility. At the same time, the education system in the US is complex and can be difficult to navigate. Liu expressed that more than simply knowing that they should go to school, new Americans should also know the *right way* to go to school. Value should be placed on learning, not solely on good grades, and students should know that it is possible to develop and improve grades over time. Taking advantage of this knowledge can open many opportunities, such as college scholarships and career options.

"When communities make it easier for new Americans to integrate, they are, by extension, making it easier for all community members to take these steps. When more people seize these opportunities, more people thrive—and the entire community thrives as a result."

Another opportunity to take advantage of is entrepreneurship. Indeed, the "self-starter" mentality has long helped individuals and families sustain life in the US. Historically, immigrants have thrived as entrepreneurs. Winta Teferi, director of the Language Access Program in the Washington, DC, Office of Human Rights, noted the substantial number of thriving immigrant-owned businesses throughout the country. She expressed that immigrants must often navigate the many steps involved in opening a business with limited access to formal business development support and services. Melissa Rodgers, director of programs and campaign director of New Americans at the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, remarked that "businesses of all kinds started by immigrants are vital. It is noteworthy that in the U.S., you can successfully be an entrepreneur even if you were not born here, whereas that could be harder in other parts of the world."

It is to the receiving community's advantage to help new Americans recognize and benefit from these opportunities. When communities make it easier for new Americans to integrate, they are, by extension, making it easier for *all* community members to take these steps. When more people seize these opportunities, more people thrive—and the entire community thrives as a result.

PARTICIPATION AND BELONGING | New Americans should know that it has become both more challenging and more necessary in the current climate of fear to ensure that immigrant voices are heard in civic life.

The freedom to participate in civic and political life is a defining characteristic of the US, but it presents unique challenges and opportunities for new Americans. Pablo Blank, immigrant integration programs manager at CASA of Maryland, acknowledged that new Americans sometimes have trouble adjusting to the idea that participation is not only possible but also encouraged and expected. Taif Jany, policy coordinator at People For the American Way Foundation, pointed out that some new Americans are coming from countries of origin where civic and political participation is not possible, legitimate, or safe. New Americans need a full understanding of the many options and implications of participation in US civic life.

Despite this decidedly American cultural expectation of civic participation, narratives persist that immigrants do not deserve to participate and do not belong in our society. "The unfortunate reality," according to Peric, "is that most Americans don't see immigrant participation or belonging as a right, but as a privilege—much like a perpetual guest in one's home. That's why it's so important for communities to not only focus on things like delivering services, but also on fostering belonging." Peric believes that this work must begin with empathy on the part of receiving communities, recognizing that demographic change can be unsettling. Communities must work to ensure that all Americans feel a sense of belonging even as the community changes. This not only benefits new Americans, but all Americans, and it is crucial to counteract the deep fragmentation that is occurring within communities around the country.

Meanwhile, the dominant narrative that sees immigrant participation as a privilege, not a right, has real implications for new Americans, who are faced with risks such as personal attacks, threats, violence, and deportation. Liu observed that this reality is in perpetual tension with the counternarrative that says that immigrants are central to American identity and that asks new Americans to lead the way and live fearlessly in civic life.

Hector Sanchez Barba, executive director of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, said that “new Americans need to know that they have the right to and deserve to participate and be fully included in our society.” He takes issue with the narrative that argues that new Americans should be perpetually grateful to be in the US and that they should remain quiet on civic issues: “Immigrants earned their right to be here. We need to change that negative perspective because we work. We pay taxes. We have lower levels of crime. We are job creators. We are active members in civic participation. We are a positive spark that makes our Democracy stronger. We contribute so much.”

New Americans should also know the real value in civic participation. Immigrants have the opportunity to make their voices heard and claim power to change laws and social perceptions that affect them directly. Nareman Taha, co-founder and director of Arab American Family Services, highlighted the potential that exists when immigrant groups band together to get things done.

Participation certainly includes voting, but it extends far beyond the duty to vote. Even for immigrants who are unable to vote, participation is crucial. Alberto Perez, director of Asociacion Mayab, said, “There are little corners, venues, and ways that we can insert ourselves and push our agendas. Many new Americans do not realize this when they come here.” As an example, Blank noted that joining the Parent Teacher Association is one way to participate and ensure that students of immigrant origin are properly represented and acknowledged. Seemi Choudry, director of the Office of New Americans in the Mayor’s Office of Chicago, added that “even if it is small scale, it has big impact. It is important to educate yourself on local policies and what you can do to change them if they are not helping you.”

It is important to acknowledge that undocumented immigrants raise a unique set of issues when it comes to participation and belonging. While there is an ongoing debate over whether such immigrants should be granted a legal pathway to citizenship, the fact is that undocumented immigrants have long been participating in and contributing to economic and civic life. Their experiences – and what they know about American life – are properly part of this inquiry in American cultural literacy.

CONTEXT AND CULTURE | New Americans should be aware that they are stepping into a complex identity framework that might be new to them; they also bring with them their own backgrounds and cultures, which are significant for life in America.

Upon arrival, new Americans encounter values and prejudices that might be unfamiliar to them. When immigrants feel welcomed and recognized for their strengths and skills they bring to society, they are more easily able to adjust to the new rules and culture. Mayra Yoana Jaimes Pena, a program coordinator in the San Francisco Mayor’s Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs, pointed out that there are many ways in which a person’s identity is manifested based on assumptions made about him or her.

Understanding this context is important for new Americans—both for their success and for their safety. For example, Olga Camargo, managing partner of TOROSO Investments LLC, expressed that understanding that a real pay gap exists for people of color and women might help new Americans avoid getting caught in it. New Americans should also know about racial profiling. Racial profiling is illegal under the US Constitution, but it occurs on a regular basis in the US. Many advisers highlighted success stories of efforts to overcome these challenges, such as police departments participating in community-based cross-cultural trainings.

"Immigrants have the opportunity to make their voices heard and claim power to change laws and social perceptions that affect them directly."

"New Americans should know that they do not have to sacrifice their individual cultural identity to meet an unrealistic and biased framework of what it means to be American."

Ethnic and religious discrimination, xenophobic attacks, and undue scrutiny are all real risks that immigrants are forced to endure in the US. Laws and institutions in the US do not always adequately serve and protect immigrants; in some cases, they deny them basic human rights. According to Jasmine Tyler, Advocacy Director for the Human Rights Watch's US Program, immigrant victims of crime face serious barriers in seeking justice, and some of these crimes take place within the immigration system itself. For example, at the time of writing, as a matter of policy, the US government is separating families crossing the border to seek asylum.

New Americans should know that they do not have to sacrifice their individual cultural identity to meet an unrealistic and biased framework of what it means to be American. Ahlam Jbara, an independent non-profit operations consultant, noted that for many new Americans,

maintaining their native identity is important. New Americans confront striking the right balance between their native identities and their new American identities. Vicky Castro, a social worker in Prince William County, Virginia, added, "The fact that we can be very proud to be American citizens does not mean that we don't want to keep our culture. We can be in touch with our country of origin, and it doesn't mean that we are not a good citizen." Attaining this "identity balance" is tied to the larger question of what it means to be American.

TEMPLATE FOR ACTION

Our recommendations in this report are intended to increase civic and cultural literacy for both new and native-born Americans. We believe that long-standing American experiences and those of new Americans must be weaved together, and that this should start at the local level. When this weaving is accomplished, the community becomes stronger, and so does our democracy as a whole. In practice, communities can promote this two-way learning in many ways, including public forums, speaker series, movie screenings, and art installations. No matter the method, communities should keep in mind the following core action components:

- **Create space for dialogue.** Work to create community spaces where newcomers and longtime residents can build relationships and have conversations—whether on a soccer field, at a community garden, at a school function, or over a meal.
- **Foster participation.** Whether at a Parent Teacher Association meeting, a board meeting, or the workplace, note who is around you, and whether and how their voices are being heard. Make note of whose voices are missing and invite them in.
- **As a host, have the spirit of a guest.** Invest in relationship-building with local groups and leaders as partners and advisers. It is critical to allow efforts to come from people within the culture of that community and to avoid regulating the behavior of community members. Individuals within communities are already working closely with issues related to civic and cultural literacy. Rather than create new efforts, bring these individuals together to help them reach their existing goals. This will ensure that any effort is genuinely useful for the community and will lead to greater interest and investment from partners and participants.
- **Address barriers in two directions.** Address the barriers that immigrants face by creating a more equitable and inclusive environment; this benefits not only immigrants but all community members. To promote two-way learning and participation, use the What Every American Should Know framework, by inviting individuals to share their own lists of 10 terms or references that they think everyone in America should know.
- **Name cognitive biases and blind spots.** Before engaging in the content of the discussion, facilitate activities that help participants see one another as human, establish commonalities, and build trust. Equity in relationships is important. Allow discomfort. Promote empathy and explain to participants the “fundamental attribution error”—that is, the mental process through which we tend to explain our behaviors due to the circumstances but others’ behaviors due to the personalities. The rest of the conversation should be built around this foundation.

RESOURCES

To supplement this report, we asked our advisers to share recommended resources. We have [compiled those materials online](#). The items are for both new and longtime Americans—resources by local and national organizations, tools for financial empowerment, civic participation guides, background reading, and more.

THE PARTNERS

Immigration & Civics: What Every American Should Know is a partnership between the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.



The Aspen Institute is a nonpartisan forum for values-based leadership and the exchange of ideas. **The Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program** focuses on the challenge of sustaining strong citizenship in America and coherent national identity in an age of demographic flux and rising economic inequality. The program encompasses a range of cross-partisan activity, from workshops and public forums to leadership summits and seminar-style discussions.



Carnegie Corporation of New York was established by Andrew Carnegie in 1911 to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding. In keeping with this mandate, the Corporation's agenda focuses on the issues that Andrew Carnegie considered of paramount importance: international peace, the advancement of education and knowledge, and a strong democracy.

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