



WHY WELCOMING IMMIGRANTS ADVANCES SOCIAL PROGRESS AND PROSPERITY

May 11, 2014

DAVID LUBELL Executive Director, Welcoming America

With the recent launch of the **Social Progress Index**, the Skoll Foundation and other leading institutions have introduced a fresh lens through which to measure our advancement as a society and as nations. The Index provides a snapshot of countries' progress across nearly 60 indicators, going beyond traditional measures like GDP to look at measures like access to knowledge and inclusion. It might come as a surprise to some that "tolerance of immigrants" was among these leading indicators of social progress. After all, with so many portrayals of immigrants in the media as dangerous threats, why would Skoll and others have chosen to prioritize their receptivity and welcome? The answer lies in a simple metaphor that speaks to why migration is increasingly being recognized as a force for positive development by the UN and other global institutions.

Imagine if your favorite sports team had a terrific player who was constantly placed on the bench. Wouldn't that frustrate you? From Einstein to Sergei Brin of Google, immigrants have always been important players in American History. They are particularly likely to start a business, file a patent, take risks, and think outside the box.

When communities fail to create a welcoming environment for their immigrant populations, they are in essence benching one of their most valuable players. But increasingly, communities across

the country are realizing the benefits that immigrants can bring, and they are stepping up to the plate to welcome their immigrant residents.

Earlier this year, Michigan Governor Snyder made waves with his announcement of a new visa program to lure immigrants to Detroit, prompting a healthy discussion on the role of municipal government in attracting and retaining immigrants. The extraordinary population loss experienced by cities like Detroit and others throughout the American rustbelt have made these cities the epicenter of discussions on how immigrants can play a healthy role in community revitalization.

While Snyder's specific proposal may be a newer approach here in the US, the broader idea that an immigrant welcome strategy should be an essential component of economic development has already taken hold in cities across the U.S., bolstered by growing evidence that such strategies create a competitive advantage for communities and lead to positive growth and prosperity for all residents. The efforts among these early adopters to capitalize on their diversity advantage and welcome newcomers is just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, communities across the U.S. and around the world are already competing in a "race to the top" to attract the human capital – at all levels of the skills spectrum – that they need to thrive in a globalized economy.

As a result, *today nearly one in ten Americans live in a community whose local government has committed to advancing an immigrant-friendly agenda.* Last year, my organization, Welcoming America, launched an initiative called **Welcoming Cities and Counties** that offers local governments the opportunity to commit publicly to advancing a welcoming culture and policy agenda. 30 municipal governments representing regions with a total population of over 28 million have already joined, and range from cities with a long tradition of welcoming newcomers – such as the cities of San Francisco and New York – to newer gateways, like Boise, Idaho and Charlotte, North Carolina.

Consider St. Louis, Missouri. After a local economic impact study found that St. Louis was missing out on a key ingredient for economic development – immigrants – the business, public and nonprofit sectors came together to work to make St. Louis the fast growing U.S. metropolitan area for immigrants by 2020.

Likewise, Dayton, Ohio developed a comprehensive welcoming plan that includes a range of program and policy recommendations that support more inclusive institutions and also strengthen ties between newcomers and more established U.S. born communities. In these communities and in others, plans have been created – and are being implemented – with the active participation of leaders from virtually every sector of the community. African American leaders in particular have been important partners in Dayton and other communities, recognizing the opportunity to increase the tax base, expand economic opportunity, and start a community-wide conversation about how their cities can become more welcoming and inclusive to *all* of their residents. As Baltimore's African American mayor, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, discussed on National Public Radio, "We've actively recruited Latino immigrants to Baltimore, and when they come here, they're thriving. Many have opened businesses, employed individuals... People who understand a growth strategy understand that I'm not choosing immigrants over native-born Americans or that I'm choosing new residents over current residents. It's about all of us growing and getting better and being successful together, it's not an either-or proposition."

Cities like Nashville, Tennessee are among those that have already seen the competitive advantage of a more proactive strategy to ensure immigrants are fully welcomed. Six years ago, after a dramatic demographic shift in which many longtime residents felt unsettled by the

growing immigrant population, local backlash spread and the city was poised to become the largest in the country to pass an English-only ordinance that would have not only devastated its immigrant population, but also would have hurt Nashville's national reputation as a welcoming city for tourists, and driven out new entrepreneurs and homeowners, costing taxpayers millions. Fortunately, local leaders – including myself – worked to build bridges between U.S. born residents and newcomers and ultimately persuaded Nashvillians to reject the referendum and embrace a more welcoming ethos. This effort proved to be a turning point, followed by a range of new welcoming policies and programs, shepherded by Mayor Karl Dean. Set on a new course, Nashville was able to position itself as a global city, attract and retain international investment and talent, and create a flourishing cultural scene that celebrates both the old and the new. Thanks in large part to its “global positioning,” Nashville led the country in job growth in 2012 and attracted significant corporate investment and entrepreneurial startups. The city's growing economic strength illustrates how a welcoming culture creates benefits that are enjoyed by the community as a whole.

Just a few years ago, cities in Alabama and Arizona were racing to the bottom with policies that sought to drive out their immigrant populations – with disastrous consequences. Today, cities across the country are racing to the top, to welcome newer immigrants while also ensuring that U.S. born residents are part of the conversation around their changing communities and the shared opportunities that demographic change can bring.

As the debate over comprehensive immigration reform continues, leaders in Washington should pay heed to this growing movement of innovative municipal efforts and the growing recognition of the economic imperatives for welcoming and inclusive policy. The challenge is out to all cities – and we hope many more will continue to win in this race and to position themselves for success and positive development.