

**Remarks on Higher Education and Immigration
National Press Club
Washington, D.C.
November 14, 2017**

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Generations of Opportunity-Seeking

I want to start today with a very simple, but I believe powerful fact about our country: both historically and in contemporary life, our communities (and therefore our educational systems) are made up of generations of “opportunity seekers” who travelled here, sometimes fleeing trouble at home and other times simply looking for a better life, putting down stakes, raising families, learning new languages, sharing cultures and faiths. Our country is built on their will and the commitments of those we now question as to whether they are or ever have been “American.”

Listen to the words of one of my students at Rutgers University-Newark, Dina Sayedahmed, whose mother immigrated to the U.S. at age 25:

“My mother is resilient. She doesn’t believe in giving up, and she doesn’t believe in letting anyone or anything discourage her. She is unafraid and unstoppable. My mother grew up between Libya and Egypt at a time when political and social dissent were unheard of... Ironically, in America my mother learned to stay quiet and endure patiently... In silence but resilience she learned a foreign-language. She learned to navigate streets whose names she couldn’t pronounce. After she had my youngest brother, she pursued her master’s degree then went on to teach chemistry at a public high school. .. She hammered her resilience into us and expected nothing less than extraordinary from us.”

What is critical about this story is precisely that it is NOT extraordinary. Certainly not unusual among the narratives of our students at Rutgers-Newark, documented on a digital platform called Newest Americans, and not in our 350 year old global city of Newark, N.J (defined by waves of migration and immigration – from the U.S. south in the Great Migration north, from Europe bringing waves of Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants, across the Ironbound in Newark, a neighborhood defined by Portuguese immigrants and now more recently by waves of Brazilians and Central Americans, and a strong Middle Eastern and vibrant African community, and so on); not unusual in a state that has the 3rd most dense immigrant population in the country (some 40 percent of New Jerseyans are either immigrants or children of immigrants and 30 percent of

¹ Invited keynote remarks given at the Forum on Higher Education and Immigration convened by the Cisneros Hispanic Leadership Institute of George Washington University at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., on November 14, 2017.

those five years old or older speak a language other than English at home). Nor is it unusual in most of the communities that define what William Frey at Brookings called the diversity explosion, in our ever-evolving American social geography.

E Pluribus Unum and the Diversity Bonus

Indeed this is our talent pool of the future; it is the diversity that will define the prosperity of our knowledge economy in the decades ahead, just as it has always given life and strength to our communities over centuries and embodied our country's founding democratic principle of *E pluribus unum* – out of many, one. Hence it is so fitting that every July 4th, the Carnegie Corporation celebrates (with a full page listing in the New York Times) innovators, entrepreneurs, civic leaders, artists, all of whom came to these shores from other places, to contribute to our prosperity and the vibrancy of our democracy. This year's listing, as part of the initiative Great Immigrants Great Americans, included Nobel Laureates in physics, in chemistry, in economics, and in medicine, Pulitzer-prize winning novelists, distinguished journalists, public servants and jurists, founders of companies, university leaders, and major philanthropists and humanitarians, among many other contributors to our economy, our health, and the well-being of our democracy.

And while we have not always lived up to the aspirations of our inclusive national identity—turning our backs on the Native Americans whose land we pillaged to found this country, building an economy on the labor of Africans whom we forcibly brought here, and sending to internment camps, our Asian-American neighbors in a blanket assessment of threat in World War II – to name a few of our most deplorable shared sins – it is difficult to imagine that the technical and social innovations that have defined our nation's greatest moments could possibly have happened without the contributions of such a diverse talent pool coming to the American table—to our colleges and universities—with insights and aspirations honed in countries all over the world and enriched by family traditions, cultures, and languages that create a vibrancy to the intellectual and social landscape we all call home.

Moreover, there is little doubt, and much documentation, that as the challenges of innovation in an increasingly complex knowledge economy grow, there is even more of a “diversity bonus” (as complex systems theorist Scott Page labels it) to be reaped if we continue to bring to our nation change makers who hail from many places, speak many languages, and are united by the striving for opportunity that has always strengthened our human capital map.

Change-Makers

When I think, then, of who the change-makers in our future will be, when I look across my diverse campus and in my global city, and then imagine the full impact of the harsh immigration and refugee policies and proposals (from rescinding DACA to imposing travel bans and turning away those seeking asylum in the U.S.), I worry greatly for our future. Who will contribute to our national prosperity and build a more nuanced national unity that strengthens our democracy and overcomes the divisive landscape that pits peoples and groups and sows fear of difference and displacement instead of appreciation for diversity and the benefits of inclusion? Who will teach us all about the humanity of others' faiths, as happens every day on our college and

university campuses when we see diversity not as a threat but as an opportunity? Look at what happens when students feel safe rather than threatened, and know their voices are heard, as happened on my campus after divisive proposals to ban Muslims from immigrating emerged during the 2016 presidential campaign. Soon after that, using the Newest Americans digital story-telling platform, several of our Muslim women students gave a voice to and put a face on the many women locally and globally who make the decision to wear the hijab, explaining their own decisions to do so in very personal terms in a video titled, “Hijabi World,” that has been viewed more than two million times through [The New York Times Lens](#) website. Colleges and universities are supposed to be places to learn to walk in others’ shoes, and this seems so necessary today when the expression of empathetic citizenship, no matter another’s documented status, is at a low ebb.

So, today, I think too about what we would miss if we didn’t have our 217 Dreamers, including 34 TheDream.US Scholars, at Rutgers-Newark who so value their educational opportunities, who as a group not only outperform their peers academically, but excel in so many leadership roles on campus, including organizing an RU Dreamer club, and co-founding the NJ DREAM Act Coalition to make sure their positive voices and stories are heard throughout the state. So, to help keep Rutgers-Newark affordable both for our Dreamers in Newark and those across New Jersey who—like most first generation students nationally—get their first taste of higher education at our great community colleges, we have made sure that their immigration status is not a barrier to their qualifying for our Rutgers University – Newark Talent & Opportunity Pathways program (RU-N to the TOP), which guarantees full tuition and fees will be covered for all Newark residents with an adjusted gross family income of \$60,000 or less and those transferring with an associate’s degree from a New Jersey community (county) college who meet that same income criterion. Currently, 70 of our 683 RU-N to the TOP scholars—more than 10%—are Dreamers.

Even after graduating and excelling in their careers, our undocumented students have not forgotten their commitments to easing the path to success for other undocumented and mixed status families – one alum, for example, works as a coordinator of special education services at the Newark Public Schools and co-founded UndocuJersey, spreading knowledge among families about real options for college access for their children; another alum served as president of the Physicians for Human Rights chapter at Stanford University and volunteered in NGOs on global health, while doing Stem cell research and gaining a medical school degree. These are only a few of the many examples.

I think about where they would be if they hadn’t found their way to us, if they hadn’t had the courage to try to forge a path forward, like the hundreds of families from Newark and across New Jersey who have received knowledgeable counsel from the incredibly dedicated faculty, law students, and local professionals of our Immigration, Child Advocacy, and Constitutional Law Clinics at Rutgers-Newark, whether one-on-one or in our annual UndocuRutgers open house for undocumented students and their families. I think about the critical counsel that our immigration lawyers are providing to our DACA students in the specially mounted Rutgers Immigrant Community Assistance Project (RICAP), and their efforts to train other campus personnel to support our valued Dreamers. And I think about the many more students and

families who never end up seeking pro bono services like these because they judge even seeking help to pose too great a risk.

I think about what we at Rutgers-Newark gained by welcoming Dr. Jamil Ammar, a Syrian national and member of the Druze minority persecuted by all sides in the ongoing Syrian civil war, who came in the summer of 2015 to Rutgers Law School through the Scholar Rescue Fund, alone and unable to visit his wife and young children who fled to Canada, because of complications here in securing refugee status. As our law school dean, Ron Chen, describes: “Ammar immediately became a buoyantly enthusiastic member of our community of scholars. He wrote prolifically and presented research on the Syrian conflict, the role of law in regulating social media technology used by terrorists, and the intellectual property implications of 3D printing technology used to manufacture artificial organs for human transplantation. Ammar developed a devoted following of students in his classes on intellectual property and international security...” Now, our community’s loss is Canada’s great gain, as Jamil has reunited with his family and is an Osgoode Catalyst Fellow at Osgoode Hall Law School of York University in Toronto.

I tell that narrative in some detail here because it so exemplifies how our exclusionary and all too insular immigration and refugee policies significantly restrict not only the dreams and desires of individuals but also our own collective ability to understand the world, to make common cause with so many around the world that want only to enhance international and national security – the lessons that Jamil had to impart are potentially so valuable to peace and security, and he surely is not the only voice that we are keeping from our shores who could help us navigate our contested world if only we would embrace them, as we have in generations past.

We cannot afford to forget our histories if we are going to imagine our futures together – for as Newark Rabbi Joachim Prinz, himself a refugee and Holocaust survivor who was welcomed to America, implored us to remember when speaking alongside his friend the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr at the 1963 March on Washington: “Neighbor is not a geographic concept, it is a moral concept.” We all have the collective responsibility to build an inclusive America that draws upon the diverse skills, passions, values, insights, and perspectives of everyone, to grow prosperity for all.