



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume IV: Remaking America: Contemporary U.S. Immigration

Introduction

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The United States, that “permanently unfinished” society, has again become a nation of immigrants. While most Americans will agree that millions of newcomers are changing the face of U. S. society, there is mounting controversy over whether these changes are necessarily good for the nation. As explored in the seminar, concerns over this new immigration are frequently linked to legitimate preoccupations over domestic job loss, federal deficits, racial tensions, and the preservation of core cultural values. What we came to decry, however, is the way that some politicians and members of the media have sought to convince the American public that serious and complex problems can be solved by placing the blame on new immigrants, one of the most vulnerable segments of our society. We concluded that ignorance and disinformation about the newest wave of immigration has contributed to public indifference to, or acceptance of, draconian measures such as Proposition 187.

As seminar Fellows compared the many myths about contemporary immigrants against both social science research findings and first-person accounts by immigrants, they concluded that both they and their students needed to set the record straight. For example, contrary to conventional wisdom, the least educated and the most educated groups in the United States are immigrants. Moreover, the latter group encompasses immigrants from Asia and Africa not Europe. While passions soar over claims that immigrants displace native-born workers, studies consistently show little if any direct displacement and point, instead, to larger structural changes in the U.S. economy (e.g., deindustrialization and downsizing) as the basis for mounting domestic job loss. What is also commonly overlooked is the fact that immigrant entrepreneurs create jobs: twice as many, in fact, as their native-born counterparts.

Many of the Fellows concluded that in order to set the record straight, students must come to appreciate the tremendous diversity and richness which abounds within the population of new immigrants. Fellow’s units explore the historical and cultural backgrounds of the newcomers, their diverse motives for emigrating (e.g., voluntary vs. involuntary), their varied legal statuses (e.g., documented, undocumented, immigrant, refugee), and the multiple modes of their incorporation into U. S. society. In place of scare headlines, we find in these units the human face and valiant struggles of new immigrants; these are truths that students will encounter as well, as they interview recent immigrants and role play about migration experiences. To underscore that the alien “they” in our midst are really “us,” several Fellows have devised creative projects whereby their students will trace their own family’s immigrant journey and compare it to the trials of today’s newcomers. And to equip and empower their students to make informed judgements about contemporary U. S. immigration, several Fellows have incorporated activities such as debates and critical essays about controversial issues like bilingual education (versus “English Only”) and Proposition 187. As you read the units

below, I trust that you will share my enthusiasm for the care and creativity with which the Fellows take up the challenge of educating us all about the opportunities and problems that lie ahead as we enter into the twenty-first century as members of an increasingly multiracial, multicultural, immigrant nation.

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