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An Immigrant's Journey in Higher Education

Angela E. Batista, Ed.D.

The United States was founded by immigrants and its population represents many different countries and cultures. In this paper, I will explore my experiences as an immigrant student and professional in higher education. My transition at age twelve from a small rural village in the Dominican Republic to Brooklyn, New York, was my defining moment of change, access, challenge, and opportunity. The chance to come to the United States as an immigrant provided access to a formal education and shaped my interest and motivation in higher education, both educationally and professionally. My arrival in the United States allowed me to attend school beyond the sixth grade and expand my worldview considerably. In this reflection, I will explore key elements of my journey and invite colleagues to consider two critical questions: (1) Why should one take active steps to retrace and reclaim one's narrative and consider its implication in their work? (2) How can one purposefully transform their narrative into an asset for professional success and for bringing their whole self to their work?

Leaving one's home country and moving far away can feel daunting and be an act of courage. There are many reasons why individuals and families make the decision to come to the United States. According to the Migration Policy Institute (2016), the U.S. immigrant population stood at more than 42.4 million, or 13.3 percent, of the total U.S. population of 318.9 million in 2014. In this paper, I will explore my experiences as an immigrant student and professional in higher education. I will share how I worked to reclaim my narrative as an immigrant and use it as a means to enhance student success and my own. My hope is that this reflection will be received as an invitation to colleagues to consider the following key questions: Why should one take active steps to retrace and reclaim one's narrative and consider its implication on their work? How can one purposefully

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work to transform one's narrative into an asset for professional success and for bringing their whole self to the work?

Shortly after I turned twelve, my mother moved my younger brothers and me from a small, rural village in the Dominican Republic to Brooklyn, New York. In addition to not knowing the English language, we experienced culture shock, fear, and confusion in every part of our lives. We shifted from living in a small, tight-knit, collective community surrounded by extended family, to a fast-paced, more isolated life in New York City. The move took us from a simple life—no electricity, running water, technology, transportation, or mail delivery—to a city that never sleeps, unlimited modes of transportation, and luxuries such as elevators, escalators, television, theatres, restaurants and much more.

Although my family experienced great change and loss, coming to the United States was a life-changing decision in our pursuit of a better life. Immigrants like my family continue to arrive daily and the new immigrant population is projected to grow in the coming years. Cohn (2016) reported that the future of immigration will change the face of America by 2065:

These projections show that new immigrants and their descendants will drive most U.S. population growth in the coming 50 years, as they have for the past half-century. Among the projected 441 million Americans in 2065, 78 million will be immigrants and 81 million will be people born in the U.S. to immigrant parents (para. 2).

Consequently, institutions of higher education and student affairs professionals will need to evolve their programs and services in order to serve a different student population, particularly as it pertains to new immigrants and future generations.

Immigration Opens Doors and Access to Education

Current and future immigrants bring new challenges and opportunities to higher education. For many immigrants, traveling to the U.S. provides access to formal education, especially for children. My parents did not have the opportunity to attend school and did not speak English; my mother worked in a factory and my father worked as a night janitor in a supermarket, where he was locked in to work overnight without security or a way to exit. In a recent NASPA - Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education (NASPA) blog, I reflected on my journey to the United States and the fact that moving to the U.S. represented my only chance to attend school beyond the sixth grade. Coming to the U.S. meant that I could pursue a high school diploma and with the help of my high school English teacher, I was motivated and encouraged to pursue an undergraduate degree.

Being an immigrant and first-generation college student, the guidance and encouragement provided by my teachers and mentors was very important. Similar to many immigrant and first-generation college students, I did not know anyone who attended college, and I did not understand how college operated. My most haunting experience was when I failed to question or challenge an advisor at New York University who told me that I could not attend a required summer program because I had missed the first day. I had received notification of my acceptance and a full four-year scholarship by mail the same day the program started. Not participating in the summer bridge program meant that I would not be eligible to enroll at the institution or use the four-year scholarship I had been awarded. Instead of challenging this rule, I simply accepted what I was told by those in authority, assuming that there were no other options to consider. Since the most important goal was to attend college, I happily moved on to Brooklyn College where I worked my way through college for nine years.

While completing my undergraduate degree, I fulfilled all requirements for the bachelor's degree but was also required to complete English Language Learners and other developmental courses. I was a good student and even made the dean's list. While I dreamt of pursuing a Ph.D. in English literature, I was told that I was not good enough by an advisor and accepted that he must know better. Instead, I was urged to pursue a graduate degree in counseling. Attending graduate school at the University of Vermont was the first time I left home and became aware of my identity and narrative as an immigrant. The beliefs I internalized about myself as an immigrant and first-generation student shaped how I judged my ability to succeed. Arriving at the University of Vermont, I did not think I belonged there and felt racially, ethnically, and culturally excluded. Despite my previous academic success, I lived in fear of being discovered as unworthy of attending graduate school.

My experience as a graduate student is not unique, however. Throughout my work with college students, I have learned that students of color, immigrants, and first-generation students often find it challenging to navigate transitions while also trying to increase their cultural and social capital. I see every day how students' negative internalized narratives can easily become barriers. In addition to educational challenges, many students from marginalized backgrounds must work to overcome stereotypes and seek to feel accepted beyond their identities and experiences. However, I have also seen academic and social barriers transformed into strengths, helping students to stand out and opening doors to new opportunities. In my case, achieving academic success and obtaining social and cultural benefits over time have unlocked doors to different leadership roles in higher education.

Importance of Cultural Understanding

As I have taken different roles in higher education, I have pursued continued learning and recognized the importance of understanding my own cultural experience and that of the students I serve. Furthermore, I have remained committed to utilizing what I have learned to advance issues related to identity, diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in higher education. I believe that my experience as an immigrant provides an enhanced perspective and improved ability to overcome many obstacles, educationally and professionally. In a recent article, *Times Higher Education* (2016) noted, “Working with people from different countries and cultures can benefit students and researchers personally and professionally, by cultivating new perspectives and ideas” (para. 1).

Thus, given the changing context and demographics in higher education, enriching one’s cultural understanding is critical in order to be a successful student affairs practitioner. As the student population continues to become more diverse, we must develop a stronger cultural understanding in order to increase access and student success. In addition to developing cultural knowledge, those working in higher education must be student- and learner-centered where “teachers pay close attention to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students bring into the classroom” (Bennett et al., 2004).

Immigrants face a variety of transitional and academic challenges and often feel they live in two different worlds, each with different languages, cultures, values, and belief systems (Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, & Leclere, 2007). For some immigrant students, their experience can translate into internal narratives that limit and prevent them from building supportive social networks that are integral to their success. Throughout my student career, however, I was fortunate to find teachers and mentors who valued diversity, encouraged me, and helped me to discover my own capability. With their guidance and help, I was able to overcome barriers and capitalize on my experiences as an immigrant in the United States. My mentors in college, graduate school, and at work have also helped me to see the importance of examining my own narrative and not allowing myself to be defined by the beliefs and values of others.

One defining example of the impact mentors have had in my career is the way in which I began to work in student affairs. When I started graduate school, I did not know anything about student affairs. However, with the trust and encouragement from one of my mentors at the University of Vermont, I began to work in what was then the Office of Multicultural Affairs. I later went on to serve in multiple departments within the Division of Student Affairs and central administration. My learning during those years provided me with a solid platform from which I explored a career in higher education. I also felt accepted and valued by student

affairs leaders who invited me to participate in policy development, create new initiatives, and to be part of the team responding to bias incidents on campus. As a result of these experiences, I saw myself as a leader for the first time. More importantly, I was supported and encouraged to engage in deep self-reflection about my identity as an immigrant, a person of color, and a first-generation college student.

Reclaiming My Personal Narrative

My time at the University of Vermont also helped me feel empowered and transformed my internal deficit-based narrative into a self-inspiring, strength-based way of looking at myself and my work. This revelation allowed me to successfully navigate my experience in higher education. The process by which I worked to reclaim my narrative involved various steps, including (1) exploring my heritage and family history; (2) identifying connections between the ways my narrative shaped my self-concept and ability to succeed; (3) defining the ways in which I could bring authenticity to my work; and (4) committing to continuous learning. For example, while completing my graduate degree in Counseling, I chose to engage in a year-long independent study of Bowen's family systems theory. This branch of behavioral theory "views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit" (Kerr, 2002, para. 1). The theory outlines eight key concepts. In my project, I focused primarily on the concept of *differentiation of self*. Kerr (2002) states:

People with a poorly differentiated 'self' depend so heavily on the acceptance and approval of others that either they quickly adjust what they think, say, and do to please others or they dogmatically proclaim what others should be like and pressure them to conform (para. 2).

The theory provided a framework for me to explore how my family history, including our immigration story, influenced my personal and professional narrative. Through this work, I was able to identify ways in which my family of origin continued to influence how I brought my whole self to my work. My status as the oldest child and caretaker in my family, for example, directly translated to how I behaved in professional roles, readily taking charge of situations and often focusing on the needs of others first. The opportunity to research my family history, interview family members, and gather available documentation was transformative. Through interviews, I gained knowledge and pride in what family members had achieved despite facing many barriers and a lack of access to education. I was able to finally believe that I had much to offer. I had earned the right to an education, to assert myself, and to choose to live out my purpose as an educator.

Another direct outcome of my work using Bowen's family systems theory was an

increased sense of awareness and understanding about my internal narrative as an immigrant with intersecting identities. The study and application of the theory allowed me to make connections between theory and practice, which helped me grow as a student affairs professional. This awareness enabled me to and see that my multiple identities and perspectives could help me reach my professional goals. I discovered that, because of my experience as first generation and as an immigrant of color, I had the capacity to relate to students more easily. I saw myself as a whole person and professional, felt empowered to reclaim my narrative, and was able to use this narrative to help my students.

Using My Personal Narrative to Enhance Success

However, there is no doubt that it is challenging to continually turn to my most emotional and personal experiences in everyday work. At times, it is hard to employ my personal story as a tool to help colleagues see the importance of understanding different perspectives in their work with students. And yet, I am motivated by the wish to increase understanding and to engage in an intentional professional practice. It is my hope to find ways to recreate the same level of transformation in others that I have experienced and to help others find courage to face and accept their whole self. As a professional, self-awareness and intentionality allow me to behave authentically while doing my work. I can also motivate and support others because I feel empowered by my own narrative.

For these reasons, regardless of any potential negative impact, I am willing to use myself as an example by examining and purposefully using my experience to serve others. My experiences and cultural understanding have facilitated successful transitions for students with underrepresented identities at six different Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). As a Caribbean immigrant, first-generation college student, queer woman of color from a low-income background, I am often the only person with underrepresented identities in the room. Despite the privileges I have earned through education and professional success, I am constantly engaging vulnerably with colleagues and students. Although I am often in a position of power in many situations, I continue to be an outsider whose mere presence challenges the status quo. Being rooted deeply in my narrative helps me remain open and grounded when caught in situations of implicit bias, oppression, prejudice, and even discrimination.

Because I must continually navigate my role and identities, I am continuously learning. I have found that when working with immigrant students, for example, it is natural to rely on my experience as an immigrant to connect with them. However, finding ways to translate my experiences and perspectives into an asset at the institutional level has been more challenging. Translating my diverse perspectives into assets requires that I increase my level of vulnerability. As a

result, I sometimes feel added emotional impact because of the resulting increased visibility and exposure, especially as a senior leader. Frequently, it is difficult for my colleagues to separate who I am from my work and so I must choose my battles carefully. There is rarely a moment or interaction in which I feel that I do not have to make adjustments to counteract implicit bias and its effect on my ability to succeed. I have learned that as a professional who represents many intersecting identities, I am always on stage and under the microscope.

While I recognize that the sense of performing continuously can feel exhausting at times, in my most vulnerable moments, I rely strategically on my experiences and narrative to illustrate a point and bring a personal perspective to the topic at hand. I often choose to position myself as an example to create connection, interest, and safety for others. Understandably, not everyone is willing or able to put themselves in such a position, and I am not successful every time. While it is important to acknowledge the cost associated with this approach, my ability to translate my narrative into an asset in order to advance the work outweighs the costs. In choosing to open myself up and make myself vulnerable, I am not only risking my personal wellbeing but also my ability to succeed. Nevertheless, I am driven by a strong awareness of responsibility to be an agent of change, particularly given the privilege I have earned over time.

Conclusion

Immigration has and will continue to be an important part of American history and culture. Higher education must act strategically to meet the needs of a changing and more diverse student population, particularly as we shift from a white majority to a minority-majority. In this paper, I shared my personal experiences after immigrating to the United States at the age of twelve. I also reflected on how reclaiming my narrative as an immigrant transformed me, personally and professionally. My story illustrates how understanding one's personal story and acting intentionally can transform barriers into assets for success. As student affairs professionals, it is our responsibility to support immigrant students by helping them to transition successfully and manage the college process, and by providing mentorship and good advising. As my success in higher education reveals, if we choose to share our stories and allow ourselves to become vulnerable, we can utilize our unique experiences to enhance our cultural understanding and that of others. At the beginning of this reflection, I invited fellow educators to consider my call to action by (1) taking active steps to retrace and reclaim their own narrative, (2) considering its implication for their work, and (3) carefully working to transform their narrative into an asset for professional success. While I recognize that there are many ways to achieve this goal, in my opinion they all involve self-work and courageous risk-taking. Regardless of an individual's background, identities, and experiences, each of us has the potential

to contribute significantly to creating the environment necessary for success. Considering the current and impending demographic changes in the United States, this is a critical moment in our profession. Looking at my experience as an immigrant in higher education, reclaiming my narrative has given me clarity of purpose and ultimately enhanced my success.

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