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Guest Blog

Beyond the Wal-Martization of Immigration

By Nichola Lowe and Natasha Iskander

Numerous studies of highly educated immigrants in the United States point to the value they create for our national economy. As workers, they are portrayed as resourceful, knowledgeable, and inventive. They are also praised for their entrepreneurship in the United States, and for the new employment opportunities they create for native and immigrant workers alike.

What is most compelling about this research is the narrative it helps produce: highly educated immigrants, through their contributions in knowledge and skill, are fundamentally good for America. This conclusion has lent crucial support to a recent wave of immigration proposals that seek to extend greater immigration rights to this highly educated population. This is not to say this narrative eliminates all anti-immigration sentiment—after all there are strongholds of opposition even to the immigration of the highly educated. But still, the portrayal of this group as value-creators resonates well with most Americans and has helped to tip public opinion in their favor.

The narrative surrounding less educated immigrants couldn't be more different. Some immigration scholars still insist that less educated immigrants are a drain on our society. This scholarship has bolstered the ugly surge in nativist sentiment embodied in restrictive local and state initiatives.

Many others, however, are sympathetic of the plight of this immigrant population. These scholars, in an effort to lend support to less educated immigrants, present a narrative of vulnerability and exploitation. This is story of egregious labor and safety violations and of unethical practices of wage theft by unscrupulous employers. But this portrayal, while truthful in isolation, is also potentially damaging. For nowhere in this counter-narrative is there sufficient room to celebrate and support the actual contributions of less educated immigrants to our industries and economy.

Some scholars have tried to extend this existing narrative about less educated immigrants by simply calculating the economic benefits they provide. But ultimately this too falls flat, sounding more like the Wal-Martization of immigration—namely that their main contribution is the savings they bring to consumer society in the form of cheaper goods and services. In other words, their low wages and vulnerability, while clearly bad for them, is good for us.

For those of us who study the situation of less-educated immigrant workers, it is time to shift the conventional narrative, and in the process, also reshape political discourse and debate. In doing so, we have an opportunity to borrow something from those who advocate for greater protections and rights for highly educated immigrants. Like them, we need to do a better job of weaving together a more compelling story of creativity and contribution.

We can do so by drawing attention to the role that less educated immigrants play in revitalizing numerous industries in this country and in the process, saving vital U.S. jobs; the knowledge and expertise they bring with

them to their jobs, including valuable skills learned initially through their work experience back home; and the innovations they make at their U.S. worksites that contribute to improvements in industrial productivity and quality standards. While a smattering of stories of this kind exist in ethnographic accounts of immigrant work in agriculture, manufacturing and construction, they are rarely presented together as an integrated challenge to dismissive portrayals of less-educated immigrants and as an alternative narrative that is accessible to the broad public. As such, they remain hidden, much like the immigrant contributions they describe.

This is not to say that, as we shift the narrative, there isn't still room for stories of vulnerability and exploitation. But what we need now is to embed stories of immigrant struggle within more powerful narratives of immigrant talent, ingenuity and integrity. This will help strengthen the argument that immigrants of all types deserve great recognition and better treatment for the valuable work they perform. By doing so, we not only open up a new channel for interesting scholarship, but more importantly for future advocacy as well.

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For more information on their research, see Iskander and Lowe. 2010. Hidden Talent: Tacit Skill Formation and Labor Market Incorporation of Mexican Immigrant Workers in the United States. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. 30(2): 132-146