



Linking Civic Engagement and Immigrant Professional Success: Opportunities, Barriers, and Contexts

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Introduction

We highlight the strengths of qualitative research for building conceptual scaffolding for understanding the dynamic processes through which civic involvement and professional achievement intersect.

Qualitative research strategies deepen understanding of the cultural and institutional mechanisms linking civic participation and professional success.

Research Questions

- In what ways do immigrants contribute to civic engagement in the United States? And how do immigrants to the United States think about civic engagement?
- What is the relationship between immigrants' professional success and civic engagement?
- What role do cities play in immigrant professionals' civic engagement and professional pathways?

Data Collection

- Multi-year, mixed-methods project combining survey data from college-educated immigrants in seven U.S. cities and qualitative interviews with survey participants.
- In this webinar, we report on findings from 70 in-depth interviews with immigrant professionals employed in a diverse range of occupational fields and residing in both small and large U.S. cities.

Sampling and Case Selection Method

- Case selection guided by interest in sampling for range.
- Interviews proceeded sequentially.
- Representativeness matters less than saturation (no new mechanisms or processes are uncovered).

Our cases demonstrate the complex processual dimensions of professional pathways leading to success (or not) and social mechanisms linking civic engagement and professional success.

Strategies of Analysis

Systematic coding:

- Interviews coded line-by-line to open up inquiry.
- Focused coding following model of **analytic induction** whereby categories emerge from the data.

Inter-coder reliability:

- 2 researchers were assigned to code each of the first 50 interviews.
- 5 interviews, selected for range, were coded by all 4 members of the research team.

Strategies of Analysis

Using the qualitative software NVivo, the team developed an extensive codebook:

- Stimulus for migration and settlement
- Relationship to community of origin
- Context of reception
- Cities' services
- Transnational mobility
- Immigration policy
- Types of civic, community, and cultural engagement
- Membership in organizations
- Barriers to and motivations for civic involvement
- Professional pathways
- Structure of networks
- Education, schooling, and credentials
- Family and work ties
- Language
- Gender and age

Professional Pathways to Success

- Professional success exists on a continuum.
- Professional pathways: Emerging, Mid-stream, Starting over, Arrived.
- Professional pathway to success:
 - Full of “detours” “roundabouts”, “turns”, “fits and starts” and sometimes “dead-ends”..

Civic Engagement and Professional Success

The relationship between professional success and civic engagement among educated immigrant professionals is complex and dynamic.

We define **civic engagement** as a cluster of individual efforts and activities oriented toward making “a difference in the civic life of...communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.”^[1]

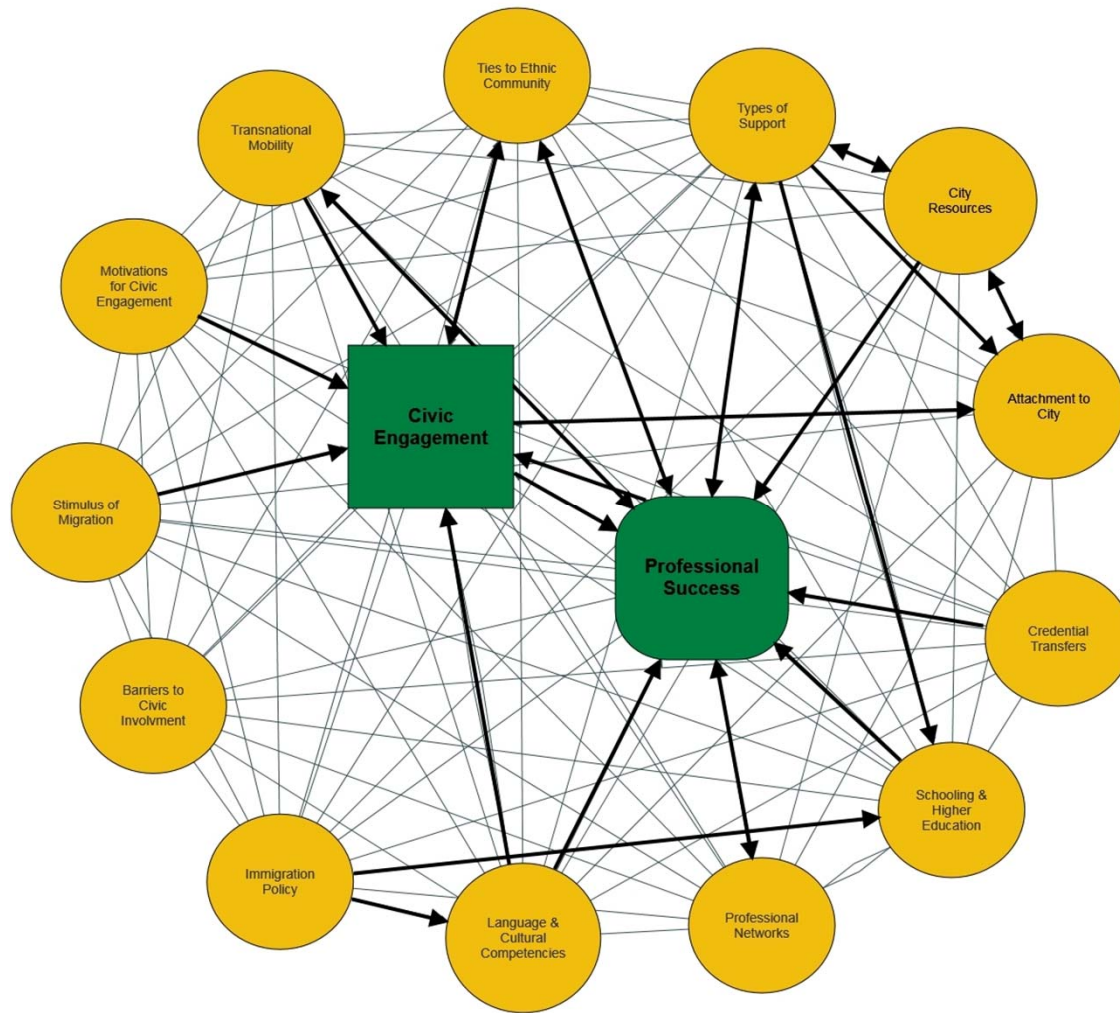
[1] Ehrlich, T. (2000). Preface. Pp. vi-x in T. Ehrlich (Ed.), *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*. Westport, CT: The American Council on Education and The Orynx Press.

Immigrant Professionals' Civic Engagement

- Immigrant professionals are variously engaged civically.
- Civic engagement among this population is overwhelmingly tied to professional and vocational interests and skills.
- Professional networks and community ties play an instrumental role in facilitating both professional advancement and civic involvement.

Immigrant Professionals' Civic Engagement

- Immigrant professionals participate in both formal and informal community-based organizations and groups.
- Immigrant professionals' civic engagement is both translocal and transnational.
- None of the 70 interviewed report involvement in national service. Immigrant professionals who reported having few community networks, also reported greater professional obstacles.



Processual Dimensions of Civic Engagement and Professional Life

1. Professional success and civic engagement linked strategically. Civic engagement serves professional ends.
2. Professional success and civic engagement overlap but civic engagement is not used strategically for professional advancement.
3. Professional success and civic engagement one and the same. Professional work serves social good and often involves types of work in non-profit and non-governmental sphere.
4. Civic engagement serves professional success.
5. Civic engagement replaces professional work.
6. Civic engagement satisfies professional goals and interests, especially when credentials block professional pursuits.
7. Professional engagement and civic engagement separated, as in the case of some types of volunteer work that are entirely unrelated to profession.

Barriers to Civic Engagement

Parenting and other household obligations

I have been involved with EFC, which is Elizabeth Freeman Center, for about eight years now. But that, again, has been once the kids were in college and I didn't have a problem with night meetings. - Luciana

Schooling commitments, and early career professional development

For the first year it was just, the residency. I would barely make it out, to be honest with you. I didn't have time...a day off to [go] shopping maybe, if I was lucky. - Angeli

Weak Social Networks

Immigrant professionals who reported having few community networks, also reported greater professional obstacles.

...then I immigrated to U.S. After couple weeks, I started actively to look for job...So, I did by myself. I studied a lot, and then I prepared my resume. I applied to the websites of companies...I didn't expect it to right away find best job, or like, you know, a good salary kind of job. But I just expected hopefully soon I would get that, but it didn't happen. I would say that it took two year and a half, I mean 2 year, to find this job right now I'm in. I'm working as a stationary engineer for city of San Francisco. The company is called San Francisco Public Utility Commission. So, now I succeed to get this position. However, those two years, you know, when you you leave, you wanted to survive. You wanted to continue. So, I started working at the server in Red Lobster restaurant to survive my life. I mean, the marriage life. And then, but I didn't give up. I just always every day, you know, I was sitting at desk, searching on the websites, applying continuously. - Amir

The Role of Cities

A city was overwhelmingly defined by its people (immigrant enclaves and broader city population).

A city's services for immigrant populations were secondary (e.g. ESL classes for immigrants, religious organizations, and governmental/non-profit partnerships).

Immigrant services facilitated civic engagement and the formation of voluntary associations for immigrant professionals.

Immigrant professionals maintained active ties and attachments to multiple cities within and outside U.S. For a subset, professional lives are best characterized as transnational and highly mobile. Transnational urbanism enabled and constrained civic participation.

Audience Questions

1. What sort of outreach to immigrant communities are there for national service programs within your organization and community? What does that work look like? Have you hired immigrants to serve at your organization?
2. How can we tap into the enormous resource of time, dedication and value commitment to civic engagement by this community?
3. In light of the rapidly changing political climate, should we expect to see changes in immigrants' commitment to civic engagement?
4. How has AmeriCorps influenced your members' professional trajectories? Do you see people moving from AmeriCorps into jobs that are related to civic engagement? Do members remain involved with your organization and/or the wider community after their terms of service end?

Research Questions to Be Explored

- What is the relationship between city and civic engagement?
- What type of 'cultures of civic engagement' and social network building strategies do immigrants bring with them?
- How do institutions (e.g. family, schools, voluntary associations and work) enable and constrain pathways of civic engagement and professional success among immigrants?

Contact Us

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