

Our Immigrant Voices

BUILDING BRIDGES

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A Building Bridges course for Immigrant Workers offered through the Labor/Management Workplace Education Program during the spring 2018 semester.

From the beginning, this course has endeavored to elevate and amplify the voices and realities of immigrant employees on campus. Our class participants and their ancestors have come from many countries around the world, each with a different journey. This course allowed all of us, from different backgrounds and from different parts of campus, to come together each week and discuss our experiences at UMass and beyond.

The panels in this display provide snapshots of our conversations, organized around three themes: *Our Journey*, *Being Seen and Understood*, and *Sharing our Stories*. The quotes on these panels are from our ongoing dialogue and are purposefully not attributed to any one individual. Symbolically, this underscores the fact that no one statement can define any one of us, or for that matter, any “immigrant” experience.

The text in the background spells out the phrase “building bridges” in 22 languages spoken on campus. These background voices suggest that, if you look and listen closely enough to our UMass community, many different voices can come together with one resounding message.

Course Facilitators:

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OUR JOURNEY

“**My father used to say**
*that helping hands are always
better than praying lips... so
I volunteer... helping the new
immigrants.*

“**I was born**
*in a desert that I can
barely remember.*

“**I want you to see me**
*as you see yourself. I want you to give me
the same treatment that you want to be
given to you. I want you to respect me and
accept my differences. As you want to be
accepted and respected.*

“**I am a living bridge.**

“**My father carried me in his arms**
*as a tubby toddler to go see hump-backed camels while my mother
was at choir practice on Sundays. They hung a plastic baby swing in
their home where I would sit and swing. My father refuses to throw
this swing away even to this day.*

“**Let me share my knowledge**
*with you. Let me learn yours with
compassion and respect. I'm sure I speak
with an accent but I can guarantee that I
do not think with one.*

“**I am a hybrid of different cultures**
*and yet belong to none. I know the English
language best but there are many American
traditions unfamiliar to me. And while I know
Spanish, I know very little about my native
country's history and culture.*

“**Growing up**
*my father taught me
not to be wasteful. At
the age of 19, he was
taken from his home
by the Nazi Germans.*

“**We are neither**
*European, nor African, nor
native Indian. We are a mix.*

“**While my early origins**
*are either far or absent memories, they are
nonetheless a part of me. My parents' long
journey lives inside of me, influences who I
am.*

“**My family**
*is my world and
that's who I am.*

“**I started teaching the refugee children**
*informally on the open ground as a volunteer teacher to
keep continuity of the education for the children who had
been in school.*

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BEING SEEN & UNDERSTOOD

“***I believe in the power of making connections***
across difference. Across backgrounds and skin tones, languages and lifestyles, age and ability. I believe that people share a common bond, that there is a potential for good in us all and even more so when we work together. The possibilities are limitless.

“***Different is not wrong***
we are all equal. I want everyone to respect differences and accept people the way they are.

“***Just because***
I don't speak English well doesn't mean that I don't have a lot to say.

“***I have complicated***
cultural identities. Both and neither—"I am those things and not those things"

“***I want to be seen***
as an equal member of society. I want to be seen as more than just a staff member. I want to be seen as a human being with good days and bad days and a life outside UMass. I want to be seen with compassion and without judgment.

“***Different is the new normal***
Speaking different languages is natural.

“***What is normal***
for me may not be normal for you. What is normal for you may not be normal for me.

“***Everyone is educated***
—has an education. And not all education happens in a classroom.

“***See me as you see yourself.***

“***Just because I am speaking***
in my first language, it does not mean that I am talking about you. I just enjoy speaking in my first language with friends and it feels natural.

“***My culture***
should not offend anyone.

“***I speak Spanish***
as a first language. I am different, I have the right to be different and be treated as an equal wherever I go.

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SHARING OUR STORIES

“
I found incredible compassion
and warmth when listening to our stories. I feel
very privileged to be trusted in this way.

“
The Immigrant Voices seminar
was a safe space, an open space, a space for listening and sharing.
I looked forward to it every week—because it was a chance to learn,
to garner newfound respect for a diverse group representing a
different side of UMass Amherst—staff from a variety of different
roles on campus that each have a clear voice and a deep history
whose lives have touched places from all over the world.

“
I’ve learned that
my journey is relevant too. I’ve learned that
one cannot simply assume another’s story,
but one may ask, and learn.

“
I appreciated learning
about everyone’s journeys and being reminded
that we all have different hopes, dreams, and
wishes for our future.

“
I learned to be more curious
about the story of a person next to me. I’ve learned that
UMass just might be the most diverse entity in the North
East. Who knew that the gentlemen preparing my meal
came here from Bhutan? That the woman who helped me
find my classroom emigrated from Poland? —From Asia;
From South Africa; from all over the globe, and we all call
this Valley home.

“
This class has given me
the space and time to appreciate and
understand others who are different from
me and see them as people with their own
experiences. It has taught me a little about
other cultures and how our jobs do not
define us. We are more than our jobs.

“
These conversations
make me feel proud of my
cultural background. Ahora
hablame en Español mas
seguido.

“
I have learned what difficulties
people deal with when they come to America.

“
This class gave me opportunities
to not judge people. Accept the differences between each
other, respect them, and be a little part of each other’s culture
and life history, and journey around the world.

“
This was a chance
to build relationships with new
people from around our university
community, A chance to hear voices
that I would otherwise never hear.

“
I created new friendships
I had the opportunity to hear and learn about
differences that have been experienced on
campus.