

## **100 Questions and Answers About Immigrants to the U.S.**

**ABSTRACT:** As national campaign rhetoric about U.S. immigration heated up, it became clear that there was a serious knowledge gap among the electorate. Students were sent out to ask immigrants and international students about the information they thought Americans should know about them. Students then organized the information into chapters and answered the questions, based on authoritative research, interviews and resources. Outside experts vetted the work for accuracy. The resulting book was available on Amazon and other online booksellers in advance of the election. It can be purchased by individuals and still, after the election, it is used in academic and corporate training. From this experience the students learned to effectively and objectively interview people, conduct research, write clearly, and edit, as well as background about U.S. and comparative politics, laws and various international perspectives. Student-authors were asked to keep four ethics in mind: Respect, Accuracy, Authority, and Accessibility.

**THE ACTIVITY:** On its face, this is a book-publishing project. At its core, though, the students became teachers and publishers. Our learning objectives were to bring down walls between American students and international communities living in the U.S. and to get them engaged in thoughtful, non-judgmental interviews to discover the issues and concerns that international people have about U.S. policy and Americans' perceptions. The goal was to find the answers through traditional journalistic and academic research and to encourage conversation. First, students conducted preliminary research concerning immigration policies, practices and statistics to provide a foundation for interviewing. Next, they were sent out with a set of open-ended questions that could keep them out of the assumptions trap: "What do you want Americans to know about you?" "What stereotypes do you hear about immigrants?" "What would you tell Americans about immigrants, if you could?" They were instructed to not probe for answers at this stage but just to surface the questions that international people thought Americans should have answers to. After the interviews, students analyzed interviewees' demographic data such as national origin, citizenship, gender and age, to assure we were reaching a cross section. Once satisfied we had a representative sample, students formed the interviewees' responses into 100 questions which were sorted to eliminate duplication and divided them into chapters in a sharable Google Drive document. The focus was questions related to immigration and naturalization. Once students had an understanding of what international people and immigrants see as Americans' knowledge deficits (which could be their own), they answered questions using accurate, authoritative data. They then peer-edited the guide, learning from each other's work. The professors also edited the guide and sent copies to several outside experts involved in immigration and international journalism. The guide was then converted into a Word

Document and one student with extra training styled it with Extensible Markup Language, making the guide accessible on Amazon (print and Kindle); Barnes & Nobles (print and Nook); Google Play, iTunes and Kobo. We also added multimedia stories to the book to humanize it. We included a student-produced motion graphic (her second) about why a wall at the southern U.S. border would not address what politicians said it would and we used immigrant-produced videos from the Immigrant History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. Accuracy, authority, accessibility and respect for subjects and readers were stressed throughout the course.

Because this project was an alternative project offered in a very large internationally focused course, students were selected on the basis of applications. The co-editors selected eight students who had some writing experience, however, none had book or journal article writing experience. Throughout the semester, the book writing team gave periodic presentations to the class. At the end of the semester, this team gave a 20-minute PowerPoint presentation about the full experience and their views about the outcomes of the project.

**RATIONALE:** Publishing is a powerful motivator for students, who crave to do so while still in school. We believe that interviewing, analysis, writing and editing are educational tools. We also believe that a big project, such as publishing an authoritative book, is within students' grasp if the tasks are explained thoroughly and distributed. We believe that students want to move beyond their own biases and stereotypes, but don't know how. By answering basic, everyday questions, students help themselves and their readers overcome concerns about sounding uninformed or hurting others with misperceived questions. In reality, in writing the immigrants guide, students were taught that, for this project, ignorance and an open mind are useful tools.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES:** The students learned about factors that push or pull people to move to new countries and the comparative difficulty of immigrating to the United States. They learned about the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship and what is asked on citizenship tests. Most importantly, they learned to listen and respect others' perspectives. All this is evidenced by their answers. In an introduction to their book, New York Times author Sonia Nazario, author of "Enrique's Journey," wrote, "I urge readers of this book to meet one of these children in your community. If you do, you will see someone with strengths and flaws, someone looking for safety, freedom and opportunity." One student co-author wrote "I thoroughly enjoyed my experience because I was able to work in an open-minded environment and was given first-hand experience in seeing the other side of immigration."

The 100-page books are being used. Amazon sales charts showed a spike right before the election (as we had hoped) a lull and then a resumption in sales after the first of the year. This book has been used in a staff training session for residential housing staff at Michigan State University and is being reviewed by a major health insurer for staff training. The guide was excerpted in the Detroit Free Press (with the student-authors' names) on Feb. 4, 2017, amid the commotion about the travel ban imposed on seven Muslim-majority countries.