

Strategies for Promoting Active Citizenship

Central to the Pan Valley Institute’s mission is to provide immigrants with opportunities to and foster their civic participation or active citizenship. Even though immigrants are not considered citizens until they are naturalized, our definition of active citizenship is not in the framework of legality, but is a broader philosophical definition within the human rights framework. Fostering active citizenship is improving the capacity of individuals and communities to relate to the world around them as active, critical, reflective citizens, as individuals coming together to shape the world around them and be active participants in making decisions on matters affecting their individual, family and community life, in addition to voting in elections.

Barriers that prevent immigrants from becoming active society members:

Language: ESL classes are available, but do not match the scale of need, and schedules are inadequate for working people

Illiteracy: voluntary programs exist, but are not adequate

Different levels of connectedness: these are based on the length of time spent in the U.S., as well as legal status

Conflicting agendas: elected officials tend to be mainstream and do not promote community issues; political agendas don’t respond to people’s needs

Lack of engagement: elected officials do not engage with the communities they are meant to represent

Alienation: this is a general lack of a sense of belonging

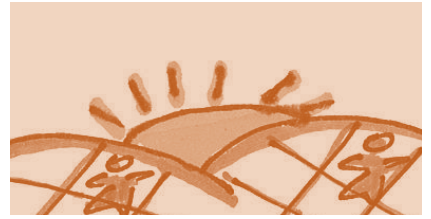
Political conservatism: this presents a broad perception of immigrants as a burden and social threat

Inadequate representation: there is a lack of political role models and forums to raise political concerns

Unarticulated community needs: top-down identification of community needs rather than bottom-up identification of community needs are discussed, but not promoted, heard or pursued

Divisions within and between communities: for example, between refugees and immigrants, cultural exchanges and learning groups promote discussion of issues but do not lead to a strategic response

Unsustained community organization: for example, healthcare services are mostly service-focused with funding-driven agendas



Principles

• *Grassroots Democracy/ Participation*

We want to develop communities that have control over the decisions that affect their lives. We believe that democracy is about the rights of all people to participate in civic life on their own terms.



Tips

- Any person who lives, produces and contributes to their society can practice active citizenship regardless of legal status

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work booklet
- Building a Sense of Belonging Tool
- Decolonization Tool



Pan-Valley Institute Strategies That Have Worked:

- Story sharing immigrant women's book
- Tamejavi Festival (provides increased visibility, celebrates diversity)
- Providing safe spaces for meetings
- Learning groups (with continuity in women and youth groups)
- Training (e.g. facilitation skills)
- Diversity awareness-raising activities
- Promoting shared agendas
- Rights awareness (e.g. discrimination laws)
- Community forums

“When a person comes to a new country (I am basing much of this on my father’s experience,) he has to decide how much he is going to become a member of the new society and how much he is going to remain a member of his old society. This can be emotionally difficult.” ~Dolly Solomon, TCOFP Alumna