

# Higher Education's Role in the Support of Diverse and Ever-Changing New American Cities: Exploring Buffalo

Katherine S. Conway-Turner<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>President's Office, Buffalo State College, State University of New York

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## Abstract

Urban institutions are typically located in diverse and vibrant cities. This diversity has changed over the decades, thus requiring campuses to address the complexity that is seen as these new American cities evolve. In this article the city of Buffalo is discussed as a city that manifests a continuous change in population diversity with a significant increase in the immigrant and refugee populations. The ways that Buffalo State College has evolved its outreach to support immigrants, refugees, and new Americans is discussed, approaches that include ways to support entry and success within the city school systems, support for families and adults learning the English language and preparing for citizenship exams, convening and support to navigate their new location, and assistance in business efforts. Extensions of the mission of urban institutions to support these new members of city communities allows campuses to participate fully in addressing the needs of this important segment of our cities. Immigrant and refugee families add to the vibrancy and economic success of our communities and facilitating their adjustment, integration, and success within our cities not only provides needed support for new American families, but adds to the current and future economic and social success of the community where they now call home. This is an important aspect of the urban anchor mission.

**Keywords:** Immigrants, Refugees, Newcomers

## Introduction

Contemporary urban environments are sometimes called “new American cities.” In this context, journalists, legislators, and community leaders focus on and describe the current complexity of cultures, peoples, ethnicities, languages, and economic layers that are ever-present within cities like Buffalo, New York and other urban landscapes across the country. However, it is important to understand that these cities have been changing throughout their histories and the new faces that you see today were once represented by other peoples, some who were newcomers, and many that, at one point, called this city or region their home. Here I will discuss the ways that Buffalo State College, like many anchor higher education institutions, recognizes and supports the cultural vibrancy within an urban city today and how Buffalo State College is participating in the transition and welcoming new families to our evolving city. The ways in which we participate in the support and transition of newcomers are many, varied, and firmly grounded in our mission as an urban engaged campus, as well as our focus as an anchor institution with a commitment to elevating all members of our community regardless of racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, place of origin or any other aspects of personal distinction.

For decades, the role of many higher education institutions, and specifically SUNY Buffalo State, has grown to meet the needs of our community in large numbers. We have opened our doors to previously excluded citizens across many decades as barriers fell and higher education institutions embraced inclusion. Buffalo State, like many urban campuses, provided educational opportunities for veterans returning from wars to gain important skills and degrees to move ahead. Urban campuses provided educational opportunities post segregation for previously excluded populations and we stood for opportunity for first generation students coming from wide-ranging backgrounds, regardless of immigrant status, as well as for all those who simply needed a helping hand to move ahead.

Buffalo State, as the State University of New York’s only four-year campus fully within a city, embraces our urban engaged focus. We are not only located within an urban environment, but we are dedicated to connecting with and uplifting our multiple diverse and vibrant communities. This diversity takes many forms and includes national original, cultural distinctions, religious differences, racial and ethnic differences, physical ability, sexual orientation, and much more, but first let us situate our environment within a historical context.

Buffalo, located in the western portion of the state of New York (NY) is the second largest city in the state. However, before Europeans stepped into the area now known as Buffalo, this territory was home to First Nations People (Szczeplaniec, 2018). The history of Native Peoples dates back thousands of years. The Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Nations lived throughout western

NY including what is now the city of Buffalo. A series of forced and savage territorial dislocations, with made and broken treaties that did not benefit peoples of the First Nations, has resulted in a vibrant but comparably small existing portion of these First Nation Peoples living within contemporary western NY (Cepla, 2019).

Within the 19th and 20th centuries Buffalo saw an influx of immigrant Europeans move into western NY just as the area was developing a thriving new economy and growing into a regionally significant city. The then strong and prosperous commerce was achieved through many interrelated advancements. The building of the Erie Canal opened the opportunity for goods to be moved from east to west and back; additionally, the grain elevator and the expanse of the railroad contributed to the centrality of Buffalo as a growing and thriving place of commerce (Goldman, 1983). By the end of the 19th century, the population of native people had been significantly reduced and significant numbers of European immigrants flooded into Buffalo to make this region their home. In the 1800's large populations of German immigrants came into Buffalo to make a life for their families. These families began to prosper under thriving conditions and they were soon to be joined by a sizable portion of Irish immigrants, followed by immigrants from a host of other European countries. During this period, a small population of African Americans also joined this mix. Western NY was a well-travelled bridge to freedom for enslaved Blacks during the 19th century as many made their way to northern states or to Canada on the Underground Railroad seeking freedom from slavery (Goldman, 1983; Brown, 2014). Some Blacks seeking freedom decided to stay in Western NY and other free Blacks made their way to this blossoming area and made this their home. This mixing of cultures was not always harmonious, but nevertheless we understand that cultural diversity is not new to the state of NY, while the reality of inclusion has been a constant challenge. As time passed other populations immigrated to western NY from all corners of the world to form the diverse community throughout the state that can be observed today.

As the economic environment changed and commerce declined, like many other booming cities in the rust belt, populations saw significant decreases. The closing or downsizing of once vibrant industries and a shift to an economy where Buffalo competed less successfully, along with a diminished economic structure, no longer allowed cities like Buffalo to dominate and the reality became a decades long decline for many cities.

## New Americans Today

What is different today isn't the local diverse community, it is that the variety of cultural backgrounds have changed. In 1910, 80% of all United States immigrants came from Europe while in 2010, 80% of immigrants come from Asia and Latin America (Nunn, O'Donnell & Shambaugh, 2018). Within the Buffalo-Niagara areas, the foreign-born population from 2000-2010 increased by 33% (Wilson & Singer, 2011). The immigrants of today are contributing to

building back a declining population that had been seen in western NY and other rust belt cities for decades as manufacturing declined and as commerce changed. As the economic drivers changed in cities like Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and others and jobs that were counted on for decades began to decline, shift, or disappear, people began to move to other locations seeking more promising opportunities for their families. This loss of population has not been easy on urban environments like Buffalo. Growth had stymied, construction was depressed, and the city faced significant downward turns for decades. This situation has allowed many cities like Buffalo to welcome with significant optimism the appearance of increased immigration and increased refugee resettlement. In 2018 the state of NY ranked fifth in number of refugees settling in the state with the greatest numbers of refugees arriving from the Congo, Burma, Ukraine, and Bhutan (Wilson & Singer, 2011). Western NY continues to seek new populations to come, join communities, and contribute to the needed growth in this area.

These hopeful newcomers, ready to take advantage of the boom in Buffalo, also add to the vibrancy of the city and are celebrated by many as urban environments grow in population. Many of these new community members are hopeful to one day become Americans. There is also broad agreement by economists and researchers that immigrants raise the economic output of communities. The resettlement of immigrants and refugees into Buffalo has been a much-needed population boost while bringing an important labor force into the area. The change in the city of Buffalo is visible within many community institutions and especially within its public school system; as of 2019, there are 34,000 children within the Buffalo public school system and 80% are students of color, with the fastest growing segment consisting of children from immigrant and refugee families. The languages spoken by those new to the United States is often not English and, according to the Buffalo Public School system, 83 different languages are spoken in the homes of these children. These new and hopeful future Americans are from countries like Burma, Somalia, Cambodia, and China and they join the diversity of Native American, African American, and Latin American populations that are significantly represented within our community. The increases in the immigrant population has not been the only change in the last decade for Buffalo; Buffalo is experiencing a renaissance as both state and private investments have increased. This can be seen in the reinvestment taking place, the new businesses opening, and growing job possibilities. A concern today is providing an environment where all community members benefit from the growth and resurgence happening in Buffalo. Anchor institutions, like Buffalo State, and communities will need to monitor closely how the city's success impacts all sectors of the region so that success reaches all, not just privileged portions of our community.

## The Role of Higher Education

Anchor institutions are place-based organizations, including IHEs and health systems, which link closely to their local communities because When an anchor institution like Buffalo State recognizes the ever-changing diversity of our city it is important to strategically address the question: how can we address the needs, hopes, and challenges of those new to our community? In many ways, the obvious connection is ensuring that these newcomers can matriculate into our campuses and take the classes and receive the degrees and certificates that will allow them to be most successful. This focus is one that is central to our work and the mission of the institution. Buffalo State does this by working individually, or in collaboration with other community partners, to provide entry and support into our educational enterprise. Our successful Upward Bound program, a federally funded Trio program, has for over 50 years provided an opportunity for disenfranchised and marginalized youth to prepare to enter a college and successfully complete their chosen degree program. We continue to serve in this space and provide a much-needed bridge for those who have faced generational and current barriers to education as well as children of recent immigrants who have not been a part of the United States higher education system. Upward Bound, since its inception, has been a bridge for African American, Latin American, Native American youth; it has also proven to be a bridge for youth from diverse immigrant populations within our city. These children from new American immigrant families are enrolling in our program in increasing numbers and then launching into higher education institutions to gain that important degree to prepare them for a successful future.

## Preparing Children for P-12 Education

Many urban based campuses have a longstanding teacher education program. These programs are uniquely suited to assist youth in underserved and immigrant families as they transition to and move thorough their education programs. Thus, many urban campuses extend their mission to provide outreach within our immigrant and refugee communities.

Buffalo State's School of Education has a long and laudable reputation, not only for teacher preparation, but for working within western NY school systems to advance the very best in teaching pedagogy and an understanding of how to elevate each child to success. With these connections our faculty work with the Professional Development School Consortium to address the diverse and changing needs of children within our P-12 systems. Preparing teacher candidates to teach within our diverse schools is central, but our education program also works directly with teachers and school systems to elevate the current work to better serve the diverse and ever-changing populations within their schools, including best practices in working with children new to this country, and working with students new to learning within the framework of the English language.

Other avenues of support for newcomer children at Buffalo State include: a global book hour that provides weekly experiences in a community location where teacher candidates use multicultural literature to facilitate language skills, and a Buffalo State Global Literacy Channel series on YouTube designed for parents and caregivers to help young readers and writers, especially those acquiring English as a new language. These types of programs are important for education institutes to develop and address the critical literacy skills that are needed to secure student success.

Our partnership with Say Yes Buffalo, a part of the national Say Yes to Education network, creates an interconnected support for children within the Buffalo public school system in ways that both address concerns experienced by children in P-12 but also tackles the transition of these children when they attend colleges like Buffalo State. The mission of Say Yes Buffalo is to create and convene a partnership of school districts, parents, teacher advocates, community institutions, funders, and higher education institutions to realize a vision of supporting students to graduate from high school and to complete college. A new grant funded by the Gates Foundation will allow us to launch this fall the Buffalo College Success Network, which will provide increased support for children as they move from high school to college completion. The college has many disciplinary ties to newcomers' families that emerge from programs that address nutrition needs, language proficiency, and family social needs. In varied ways our college, like many who are situated in the rich and diverse urban environment, provides opportunities that are central to our education mission. However, it is important to expand our programming in ways that address the critical needs of new Americans.

#### Furthering our connection with new American Communities

The Buffalo State Community Academic Center is one campus unit that directly addresses issues and concerns facing new immigrants in Buffalo. Located on the westside of Buffalo in a community adjacent to campus and within a geographic area that is largely an immigrant community, the center focuses on programming that will address key issues facing newcomers. The program Buffalo Beginnings introduces academic and literacy skills to youth that have arrived recently to our community. Such skills operate as a bridge for school age children as they prepare and begin the process of entering into the P-12 school system. Preparation for the reality of United States schools and what to expect within classrooms, how to transition to a new and unfamiliar school system, and assistance in developing literacy skills are important skills for these children. The center also offers New American English as a Second Language. These classes serve adult immigrants, refugees and newcomer adults as they seek to learn English and provides basic English language skills that allows families to navigate many language intricacies as they settle into the area. The center also offers the New American US citizenship preparation classes to provide support for those who are working toward completing the US naturalization test and successfully becoming American citizens. Additionally, the college provides thousands

of hours of community service to additional programs that address the needs of new Americans and refugees coordinated through the Buffalo State Civic and Community Engagement office. The Buffalo Beginning program partners with all four resettlement agencies (Journey's End Refugee Services, Jewish Family Services, Catholic Charities, and the International Institute of Buffalo) to provide volunteer hours and consultative services.

### Navigating the Cultural Divide

Much of the work of Buffalo State, like other campuses dealing with the same experiences, is linked with organizations or services that directly address the variety of stated needs of newcomers to the region. It is also important to navigate the cultural divides that are seen in communities; helping families feel at home, assisting them in understanding the impact of culture on behavior and choices, and settling families into their environment are ways that allow them to feel part of the community. The Buffalo State Anne Frank Project (AFP) offers an opportunity to discuss issues of inclusion and diversity as well as convening discussions that can be both supportive and reaffirming. The Anne Frank Project is another way that Buffalo State addresses the changing population throughout our region.

The Anne Frank Project began in 2005 as a project from the Theater Department. Initially the focus was to develop a campus play based on the life of Anne Frank. However, due to both the diverse campus population and the diversity seen within Buffalo more generally, the play took another turn. It was decided that Anne Frank, a girl hiding from the Nazis in Germany, would be juxtaposed with another genocide, the 1994 killings of Tutsis in Rwanda by Hutu extremists. Thus, the project laid bare the commonalities of racial and ethnic hatred as seen through the eyes of Anne Frank and Anana based on the life of Immaculee Ilibagiza as told in *Left to Tell*. From the beginning, the Anne Frank Project developed a purposeful focus to work within the Buffalo school system to share universal themes of survival, transformation, and social justice. This was grounded by work the AFP does to take Buffalo State students to Rwanda each year to both learn about the 1994 genocide and to share with teachers in Rwanda the mechanisms and tools to explore conflict resolution, community building, and identity exploration. Additionally, each fall the Anne Frank Project hosts a Social Justice Festival on campus with significant contributions from our diverse community on and off campus as participants, presenters, and partners. Many current members of immigrant and refugee families come to Buffalo with stories similar to the atrocities faced during the holocaust or during the Rwandan genocide. Thus, this project can provide a space and a way to move beyond the past hurts that paved their press to come to the United States and to affirm they are not alone and are supported.

In this festival and through bringing the Anne Frank Project to schools, the organizers both opened the discussion of the importance of social justice everywhere and the importance of our communities appreciating and supporting all segments of our communities. Differences that

divide us are openly discussed and confronted while we focus on the commonalities that unite us. These sessions and this work serves to reduce the distance between our community members and forges a dedication to unity, fairness, and community commitment.

### Supporting Economic Advancement

Within our Small Business and Development Center, Buffalo States works frequently with refugees or newcomers who are interested in starting a business. They are generally referred to the center from one of our community partners and many of the programs offered by the center are of significant interest to immigrant and refugee members. As a city on the Great Lakes, there has been strong interest in programs and opportunities based on the Blue Economy (water-based projects). Interest in entrepreneurial training is of significant interest within our community and this support in collaboration with community partners has been successful in launching the business interests of many immigrants and refugees within our region.

### Conclusion

The mission of urban anchor institutions continues to evolve, as does the surrounding community. Buffalo State's nearly 150-year history has shown a pattern of support and encouragement for groups that are new to higher education. The makeup of the population in our urban environment has changed dramatically over the history of our institution, but we have remained steadfast and true to our mission, which has always included opening doorways and creating pathways for those underserved no matter their origins. Our campus today has a layered approach to addressing the concerns of many of the newest members of our community. We extend our campus to support children, adults, and all family members who come to western New York looking for a better place to live, grow, and, hopefully, thrive. Buffalo is a new American city in many ways. It is diverse, it is vibrant, and it is growing. Today we see the city of Buffalo on the rise and as an anchor institution within Buffalo we seek to support all members of our community, new and old, in their efforts to thrive and succeed in today's world.

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