INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES:
POTENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH IN NEBRASKA

BY

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Introduction

Willa Cather, in her book, *My Ántonia* (1918), presents the reader to life on the Nebraska prairie. Through the hardships of Ántonia Shimerda, the daughter of Bohemian immigrants, Cather immerses the reader to the challenges these newcomers faced and the ways they were driven to assimilate into the new environment.

Ever since Christopher Columbus found the “new land,” as new groups of people began to arrive from different nations, they brought with them new ideas, new ways of doing things and a whole new language. The original settlers who lived in Nebraska before Ántonia’s family arrived were also driven to assimilate. Assimilation is requiring newcomers to forgo their old ways and accept “the new way of life” as the only way. This type of thinking has carried on for several hundreds of years, and has shaped our nation’s approach to newcomers for its entire history. That way worked for some, and drove many to undiagnosed mental health issues and alcohol and drug abuse. What if there is a different way to engage newcomers into a community? What if the new century with advanced technology is forcing us to encourage acculturation instead of drive assimilation?

All of us know the “First Thanksgiving” story of the early settlers who had all the knowledge from the “old world” but had to learn to adapt to a whole new way of life, and those who survived were the ones that were willing to connect with the American Indians to learn about survival in this new world. However, fast forward a hundred years when we review history through the lens of the American Indian people, we see that as the European population began to increase, the American Indian was forced into assimilating into the European’s way of doing things. The land that belonged to the American Indians was, in the perception of Europeans, available for anyone to take. The American Indians believed the land belonged to no one particular individual, and thus it belonged to everyone. However, as their numbers declined, their way of life began to go away. Could it have been different, had the newcomers and the American Indians had the tools to approach this with the knowledge we have now about inclusive mindset?

Fast forward to the 1900s, and another wave of new people began to arrive. They brought another wave of doing things differently, new languages and new ways of decision making. Life at the end of the 19th century was filled with modernizations that made many feel like outsiders. This feeling of being an outsider, due to modernization and industrialization, increased the disdain for the outsiders that were arriving post WWI and WWII. While the new arriving immigrants were either seeking refuge from war, or they were looking for the life they’d heard about in the “new world,” they were met with a cold reception similar to that of the January wind in Nebraska. What history has taught us is that when we strip people of their identity, whether the newcomer or the currently established residents, we create a climate of mistrust and disconnection that can bleed on for centuries. How can we use this knowledge to not make the same mistakes in the new century?
What are the parallels between then and now?
How has demographic shift created more complex challenges?
How can communities deal with the continued demographic shift that is happening now and into the future?
What have we learned from the past?
What do we want to repeat?
What do we not want to repeat?
What is the role of modernization in the demographic shift of the future?
How do we prepare for the future, while living in the present?

As technological advancements continue, and our ability to connect with people halfway around the world becomes easier and easier, how do we not become disconnected from the people half a mile down the road?

The answers to these questions are not easy.

Context

The racial and ethnic diversity of this nation far exceeds that of any other nation. The pain of assimilation from one place to another seems to have been passed down from generation to generation. The goal of this chapter is to help you understand how to navigate these changes in the healthiest way possible.

The “how to” must be applied on an individual level as well as on a community (as defined by RFI as networks of people working together in addition to places where people live).

According to the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, minority groups contributed more than half of the population growth in 16 (two-thirds of all) of the 24 counties in Nebraska that had population gains during the 2000s.

In 74 counties the majority population decreased, while the minority population increased.

“Counties that saw the greatest divergence between non-Hispanic White and minority population changes were Douglas, Hall, Dakota, Dawson, Dodge, Platte, Madison, Saline, Colfax and Scottsbluff (Figure 1).

These counties were also among the Nebraska counties with the highest net out-migration of non-Hispanic White residents, numbering a net loss of at least 1,100 in each case and often exceeding 10 percent as a rate over the decade.

Census Bureau data from 2011 through 2015 show that non-Hispanic White families in Nebraska have median incomes of $72,000, which are nearly double that of Hispanic families ($40,000) and more than double that of African American families ($35,000).

This, mixed with the aging workforce in Nebraska, and the increase in college education attainment among second generation Hispanics in Nebraska has major implications in the workforce of the future of Nebraska.”

How is your community engaging the new arrivals in your community?
We are at a crossroads.

We have the opportunity to impact the economics of the state now and for decades to come. Nebraska can model the way for the rest of the nation in how to connect across cultural boundaries, economic boundaries, technological boundaries and even rural and urban boundaries utilizing inclusive and adaptive community and leadership development processes as a driver for economic growth.

However, the reality is it will require each of us to do a great deal of intentional development in order to increase our capacity as inclusive leaders, because individual transformation (to becoming an inclusive leader) always precedes community or organization transformation (to becoming an inclusive community or organization). Authentic connection with oneself is the first step to connecting authentically with others who are different from us and builds trust.

In Brené Brown’s latest book, *Dare to Lead* (2018), she shares that a lack of connection and empathy erodes trust. In my work with students at multiple universities, and with people from all walks of life, I have found that those who are most capable of creating inclusive communities have high levels of Psychological Capital (PsyCap), are high in Emotional Intelligence (EQ), and make sense of differences they experience in others through the lens of Intercultural Mindset instead of Monocultural Mindset (as measured by the IDI—Intercultural Diversity Inventory).

Inclusive communities are created by people who are inclusive in their mindset. When people in the community are open to newcomers who look, sound, think and behave differently than themselves, and who see the differences not as a threat to their community but rather as the element that makes their community stronger, better and more resilient, then they are using an inclusive mindset. Creating inclusive communities requires all of us to be willing to accept that we have biases that keep us from being inclusive, but allows us to know how to navigate life without letting biases drive our decisions. If you’re up for that work, then join me on this journey. If you’re not up for that work, the reality is, you may be contributing to the extinction of your community. Is that the legacy you want?

Human beings have two basic needs:
1) to belong, and
2) to know that they matter.

Inclusive community leaders work hard to ensure this happens for people in their community the majority of the time. Being an inclusive leader doesn’t mean you are a people-pleaser, nor does it mean you are going to make everyone happy all the time. It does mean that people feel they can be safe in your presence.

People know that you are high in Psychological Capital (a higher order construct made up of hope, resilience, efficacy and optimism), have developed cultural humility (humble enough to know you don’t know everything) and are emotionally intelligent when it comes to navigating differences. When people feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to connect authentically and are willing to do the work to become inclusive in their mindset.

Please note that becoming inclusive doesn’t mean you have to change your religion or your political affiliation. Also, becoming inclusive doesn’t mean that you are giving up your identity. In fact, it is the opposite. In the process of becoming inclusive, you are connecting more with yourself and learning to navigate life from a more authentic place within yourself. The comment I hear most from students and clients is that they have learned so much more about themselves than they ever thought was possible.
Allow me to share a bit of my story with you. I entered the United States as an international student from Iran to attend a boarding school in central Florida. My parents, who believed strongly that if we graduated from a high school in this country we would have an easier time getting accepted to a college in this country, brought my two brothers and me to the boarding school. My parents had to return to Iran due to visa reasons. I was 15 years old, my older brother was 16, and my younger brother was 14.

We arrived to the school in September 1979, and just two short months after arriving, a group of Iranian students in Tehran (capital of Iran) attacked the U.S. Embassy and took approximately 65 people hostage for over 400 days.

It was a scary time for all of us. There were about 40 Iranian students at this boarding school. We were loaded on a bus and taken to Orlando International Airport to be interviewed and if there was any concern over our connection to anything going on in Iran, we would be deported. There was a part of me that was hoping for being deported. I was terrified of staying, but I was also scared of being deported.

My dorm Mom, a wonderful white American woman who had watched me wail as my parents drove away, and promised my parents to help me with laundry and adjusting to life in the USA, was at the bus encouraging me to not be afraid. In her desperation, she grabbed her 19-year-old son, who happened to be visiting his mom that day at the school, and said, “He’ll marry you if he has to, to keep you here.”

While she had no idea what those words would come to mean, they gave me a sense of peace and protection that enabled me to endure the weeks and months ahead. I didn’t marry her son. I also wasn’t deported.

I stayed at Florida Central Academy and got to learn all about the Ku Klux Klan, the hatred of people who didn’t know me but didn’t like me because of their fear of me and the love and kindness of one family.

The Iran hostage crisis led to the fall of the monarchy, which led to the decade-long war between Iran and Iraq, and the continued challenges between Iran and USA to this day. Even though I’d lived in England for about three and a half years prior to coming to the USA, the loneliness and isolation I felt during my early years of life in the USA would go on to shape my future. Although I had a British accent, because of my looks, people always were confused as to where I was from. I would not admit to being from Iran. When asked where I was from, my response was almost always, “Where do you think I’m from?” When people guessed, I’d say, “You’re so smart.”

It wasn’t until decades later that I would find out how this self-protection measure impacted my ability to become an inclusive leader. It has been nearly 40 years since that time. I have spent the last 25 years of my career working to coach, teach, research and develop the potential in leaders to become inclusive in their approach to differences. I am excited for the successes I’ve seen in people.

I am excited to be able to share the process with you and help your community successfully fold newcomers into your community. Many young people who have been my students at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln have come from rural communities from around the state. They have gained insights about themselves, and are working and living to make their vision of inclusion become a reality. Many of the leaders whom I’ve helped, taught or mentored, are from around the world. And many are working hard to making Nebraska a leader in inclusion.
Kevin Thor, originally from Stanton, Neb., is a graduate of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in 2016. Kevin became a Fulbright Scholar, teaching English in Vietnam for one year upon graduation. As a former student and teaching assistant for my Leadership and Diversity course, Kevin describes himself as a believer of people. Lover of culture. Connector at heart.

My perfect day is connecting people, opportunities, and innovation together to make a difference for others, and is filled with a ton of smiles.

I have had experiences learning in 40+ countries, serving in leadership across the nation, and as a Fulbright ETA Fellow in Vietnam; I focus on cultural engagement and program development for social enterprise/development/NGO endeavors. I believe in engaging the potential of human beings as leaders. Vulnerability and cross-cultural perspectives are outstanding—they intertwine into my Purpose in serving and connecting with others.

Through your class, I increased my desire to engage in critical conversations to grow through challenges responsibly, ethically and people-minded. Living and working with zest, too, is a must!

I gained this perspective because of being a student and Teaching Assistant for your class. I am using the lessons learned and giving back in the best ways I know how.”
Julie Kreikemeier, originally from Dodge, Neb., is a graduate of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and a Nebraska Extension Educator in Colfax County.

“I learned so much during your leadership class as a student and a Teaching Assistant (TA), but the one thing that sticks out the most was how narrow my cultural view was before I took the class.

I was able to expand my cultural viewpoint by volunteering as a student with the Hispanic community in Lincoln. Little did I know that I would end up working in a primarily Hispanic community which also features community members from the Congo and Sudan. Without that class, I don’t feel I would have the comfort level to interact with our communities in Colfax County. The impact that it had on my inclusive thinking was huge.

As a student, it put the inclusive thoughts in the forefront of my mind and made me rethink what my actions and words were. As a TA, inclusive thinking and language became more natural as I helped our students change their thought process on inclusiveness. Now, inclusiveness is second nature and I question those who don’t tend to think that way. The development of my inclusiveness serves me daily in my diverse communities by allowing me to make new connections and build our 4-H and Extension programs. That development serves as a strong foundation for my growth and capacity development within my profession, community and personal endeavors. I am forever grateful for both experiences I had in being your student and TA.”
Pastor Harry Riggs was the first African American pastor of the 150-year-old First Baptist Church in Lincoln, Neb. When he contacted me to help him navigate the differences in the church, the church was holding three different services in three different languages. There was a large number of both Chinese and Burmese members who wanted to have church for those who were learning English, but weren’t quite up to the level of competency to comprehend fully. So, once a month they all (the three language churches) had church together, while the other weekends they had church in their own language at a different time than the English language church. The three pastors worked together to make this work.

Pastor Harry’s wife, Deidra, was in a book club with a group of other women in the church. They had read the book, *The Help*, and they had watched the movie together. After the viewing of the film, they discussed how they were potentially and unintentionally making the Chinese and Burmese language ladies not feel welcomed and integrated into the life of the church. So, Deidra, who knew me from my work at Bryan College of Health Sciences, connected me to the team and to her husband, Pastor Harry. Over the years, we did a few things together, and they created their own group to help work through some of the suggestions I gave them. We had several sessions where I did individual and group development work with them. Here’s what Harry had to say about insights he gained during that time:

“The concept of developmental mindset around cultural differences revolutionized my ability to understand myself, and not feel guilty about letting others be who they are. As I grew in my developmental mindset to being more inclusive, I have been able to see this as a vital attribute of clergy leaders.

I seek to be a bridge builder, and the knowledge that I have gained has helped me to be more patient when there are divides created by differences. Dr. Fagan’s ability to help me understand where I was in my journey and seeking to take the next steps in a diverse context is something that I had never experienced before. The internal work encouraged in me allowed me to be more open to understanding the thoughts and feelings brought on by my experiences, upbringing and education, which then helped me to make more room in my life to accept others.

The knowledge I gained by going through this process is giving me a new and more loving vision and version of the Gospel of Jesus and the Bible. And now I am in a position to avail other clergy leaders to this type of learning.”
Last, I’d like to introduce you to Jeffrey Bliemeister, who is the Chief of Police in Lincoln, Neb. He and I met when he was finishing his Master’s degree at Doane University. As part of his Developing Coaching Leaders capstone process, students work with faculty to understand the impact of inclusion on their approach to leadership. Here’s what Jeff shared regarding his growth and development:

“While we discussed my upbringing, my educational background and the lack of exposure to diversity, you provided a powerful message that resonates today:

I need to be intentional about developing positive relationships with those whose life experiences differ from my own based on race, ethnicity and culture. As those relationships develop and trust is gained, I can see, hear and feel the influence of these differing perspectives in my personal and professional life. Using the tools you shared helped me to gain awareness and provided the opportunity for discussion, reflection and change.

Honestly, while attending Doane and participating in the curriculum promoting inclusive leadership, I didn’t see the full spectrum of how these lessons would impact my future. In 2016, when I received an appointment to serve as Lincoln’s Police Chief, your voice and the awareness I gained became incorporated into every facet of my life. I am constantly searching for opportunities to build positive relationships in advance of tragedy. I need to hear the voices of those we serve from the diverse representation of our community. Your instruction provided a foundation that I continue to work to build upon.”
In Conclusion

There are many more stories like these. I am not sharing these stories to pat myself on the back. I am merely a faculty member and person who desires to develop the potential in human beings in whatever ways I can. The exciting part of this, for me, is the ripple effect of the individuals whose stories are shared here.

My purpose is served when I see the way they are using the lessons in their personal and professional lives. Becoming an inclusive leader isn’t easy and it doesn’t happen because of travel, or learning a language or having a family member of a different race or ethnicity. All of those things are wonderful. But they aren’t enough.

The process of growth and development to becoming an inclusive leader requires intentional self-reflection as we navigate life, day-in and day-out while challenging ourselves to be curious about newcomers and invite them into mutual adaptation as we learn and grow about each other. It is more of a marathon than a sprint. I hope as you read their stories, you could see the impact of this in yourself. It is worth the effort. You are worth the effort.

As our world becomes more complex and our state becomes more diverse, we need inclusive leaders like Julie, Jeff, Kevin and Harry. Leaders who have the capacity to lead others through the complexities and enjoying life while doing so.

We at Rural Futures Institute are dedicated to developing inclusive leaders who have the capacity to do just that while expanding the body of knowledge in Inclusive Community Leadership Development as we do.
“WE DON’T SEE THINGS AS THEY ARE; WE SEE THINGS AS WE ARE.”

-AANIS NIN