

Bridging the immigration divide

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In an engaged research effort to foster cross-cultural understanding, Anthropology Assistant Professor Angela Stuesse accompanied leaders from a Guatemalan Mam immigrant community on a political education tour in Mississippi. Credit: Angela Stuesse

Recent immigrants and people descended from earlier immigrants – whether voluntary or forced – often eye each other warily, sometimes finding themselves at odds.

Making a connection can be as simple as knowing how to start a conversation – one that can become the basis for working together – rather than a fight.

But as Angela Stuesse has found, such conversations often don't just happen. And if they do, they can be touchy.

"Across cultures, knowing what not to say can be as important as knowing what to say and how to say it," points out Stuesse, an assistant professor of [anthropology](#) at the University of South Florida.

Her research into the consequences of new [Latino immigrants](#), [African Americans](#) and working class Whites coming face to face at work in the South has taught her a great deal about bridging differences.

"People don't always know what to make of newcomers. They're struggling with the changes happening all around them and with beliefs such as 'they're taking our jobs' and other [misperceptions](#)," she said. "Immigrants, too, may hold racial and other [biases](#) toward those they come into contact with. There's a need to help groups understand each other. Ideally, they can work together and develop mutual respect."

Stuesse's research has had many positive impacts. For one, there's her forthcoming book, "[Globalization](#) 'Southern Style.'" It tells the story of transformation of small-town Mississippi when Latino immigrants begin working and organizing alongside African Americans in the area's chicken processing plants.

While working in Mississippi, Stuesse was a founding [collaborator](#) of the poultry worker center, MPOWER, where she drew upon her research to help facilitate structured dialogue and spaces for political education and cultural sharing among immigrant and U.S.-born poultry worker leaders.

In addition, prior to the book coming out, Stuesse has made an important contribution to the communities she engaged in her research – a contribution that will facilitate further bridge-building conversations.

"Based on our experiences in Mississippi, I was curious how communities in other places are having similar conversations about immigration, race and social change, and what materials they have developed to aid such exchanges," she said.

Therefore, during her post-doctoral studies at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, she and her colleagues there began seeking answers to this question. "What we discovered was that there are groups working on this issue all across the country and that they were eager to share and learn from one another."

From that, a very special project was born.

What began as collaborative research that analyzed programs and materials developed across the United States, grew into something more: Intergroup Resources, a comprehensive and impressive new online resource center. It's evolving into a growing national network.

"We gathered these materials as well as the lessons learned by the various groups to make them broadly available to others embarking on intergroup relations work," Stuesse said.

The user-friendly Intergroup Resources website built and designed by Stuesse's research team offers curricula, dialogue guides, educational materials and descriptions of the efforts of various groups.

"Most of the people working on creating dialogue between different groups just started from scratch and figured things out as they went along. They have done amazing work. Over time, they have become experienced at helping people get past their initial suspicions of each other. They have success stories, and they have developed pedagogical tools and tools for structural analysis that can help others."

Intergroup Resources represents a natural progression for Stuesse. Her postdoctoral fellowships at Kirwan and the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, and the work she did earning her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin, brought her into close contact with immigrant communities. Immigrant rights, racial justice, and bridge-building across difference became her main areas of interest.

On this project, she worked with an advisory committee made up of experienced organizers and educators. Under their guidance, her research team conducted interviews, reaching out to 75 community organizations, worker centers, unions and independent activists across the country.

Intergroup Resources was unveiled last fall at a gathering of experts on immigration and refugee policies, service providers, academics, government officials and advocates at the National [Immigrant Integration Conference](#), the signature event of the National Partnership for New Americans.

"This organization works to help make sure everyone has the opportunity to benefit from our country's resources, whether it's education, health care or work – everything, really," she said. "Attendees were invited to test the site and we've received a wonderful response and great feedback. Today the site reflects their input.

"What's really exciting is that in addition to the online experience of learning how others have approached intergroup dialogue and relationship-building, we envisioned the creation of an online support network, through which groups could share their experiences with the site and aid one another in adapting the materials to their local contexts. And that's starting to take shape."

Stuesse also had another goal.

"As the lead researcher, I was interested in creating opportunities for students to get involved," she said. Not only did her team get valuable research experience, one member found a job he took on right after graduation.

Owen Gaither earned his master's degree in applied anthropology at USF in May. As an intern he was an integral part of the team helping to organize and classify the hundreds of resources the research had gathered. After graduation, he began working with one of the community organizations highlighted by the research, ROC United, in Miami. The part-time position served as a welcome bridge to a full-time position teaching at Barry University and working as an adjunct at Miami Dade University.

"Far too often people that want to help out in some way and get involved, feel alienated, thinking that there are not many other people out there with the same goals," he said. "This resource center is a place for people to go and find others that are doing many positive things around the country, and ask them advice, learn from their experience and see how to help."

He added, "Working on this project also taught me real world skills that were a definite bonus when it became time to apply for work after school."

Stuesse is moving on to her next research and writing projects but will continue to support Intergroup Resources in her new capacity as an advisory committee member. In the meantime, some of those who contributed to building this service have taken up the task of shepherding it forward into a new phase – adding to the resources and publicizing their existence.

One of the most active is Dushaw Hockett, executive director of [SPACES](#) (Safe Places for the Advancement of Community and Equity). He is a member of the Intergroup Resources' advisory committee and co-authored one of the curricula featured on Intergroup Resources. His organization works with communities and other organizations to create spaces that build community and cultivate the strength to talk across lines of real and apparent difference.

"SPACES is the perfect organization to help move Intergroup Resources from a usable resource to one that is actively used by communities and organizations across the country. Dushaw Hockett is a thoughtful communicator, an experienced facilitator, and is skilled at helping groups identify their intergroup challenges, strengths and goals," Stuesse said.

Hockett, in turn, observed, "The country has changed – and is changing. People who don't look alike, think alike, talk alike and haven't lived alike are sharing physical and political space with one another. We need new tools to negotiate real and perceived differences. Intergroup Resources seeks to provide these tools.

"I see our role as one of growing Intergroup Resources into a robust resource center with both online and offline components. SPACES is cultivating a diverse universe of people engaged in dialogue across difference, helping them learn to navigate Intergroup Resources, and assisting them in adapting existing efforts to meet their particular needs. In time, Intergroup Resources will become a space of praxis and feedback, where real and virtual communities of folks will share their experiences and learn from one another."

Stuesse concluded, "It's profoundly encouraging to see academic research being put to use and benefitting people who are doing such important work. But then, that's what applied anthropology is all about."

Provided by University of South Florida

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