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Innovations in Building Meaningful Contact Across Difference

This is the second in a four-part series of articles that explores what Welcoming America and other national- and local-level thought leaders and practitioners have learned about engaging long-term members of receiving communities in order to advance immigrant inclusion and build stronger, more cohesive communities. Released in conjunction with Welcoming America's 10-year anniversary, this [social cohesion series](#) updates the 2011 Receiving Communities Toolkit. The series examines how to build cohesive communities in an era of migration and change—with a focus on innovations in contact building, leadership engagement, and positive communications—to foster greater belonging for all.

Introduction

At a time when Americans often seem more defined by what divides us rather than the ties that bind us, people may have few opportunities, and less appetite, to find common cause with each other. Yet the nation's democracy depends on our social cohesion, a shared vision of the future, and embracing a spirit of what is possible when we all work together. Strengthening the well-being and prosperity of all residents and what connects us as neighbors and Americans is more critical today than ever. Reinforcing social cohesion requires leadership engagement, positive communications, and building meaningful contact across difference. Leadership engagement and communications are both strategies that will be addressed in future papers in this social cohesion series.

Promoting meaningful contact may be the most important of all strategies to foster greater understanding across difference. Personal experiences and relationships significantly mold our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. When people change their minds about a public policy, it's often because of an experience they or a loved one had. On issues ranging from substance abuse to gun laws to education reform, so much of individual opinion is shaped by personal experiences. While facts can be helpful in shaping opinions, experiences and trusted relationships are what provide an opportunity for real transformation.

The same holds true with respect to immigration and immigrant inclusion. Research demonstrates that people who hold some of the most negative views on the issue have had fewer direct, personal experiences with immigrants than those who hold more positive views. While language and cultural barriers inevitably make the development of these relationships less likely to occur



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organically, we know that having meaningful contact with people across difference may be the most important element in building acceptance and inclusion of others and strengthening social cohesion. In these polarized times, contact building efforts may be the most essential and foundational method of bridging our nation's divides and strengthening our social fabric. While contact building work has been underway for years, there has been a recent surge of interest in these strategies, with efforts becoming more creative and nuanced.

Innovative Contact Building Models

In recent years, contact building activities designed to bridge divides and foster greater social cohesion have proliferated. The following profiles highlight innovative contact building models that are particularly relevant today.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS ACROSS RACE: WILLIAM WINTER INSTITUTE FOR RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Race is the entry point for the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, which works to end discrimination of all kinds. Based in Mississippi and working in communities across the region, the organization recognizes that people are defined by multiple identities, so they take an intersectional approach. *The Welcome Table* is grounded in storytelling, conversations, and helping people make changes in their communities. Participants who sign up are prepared for this table, or ongoing dialogue, by learning that they will be talking about topics that make them uncomfortable, but that it's a safe environment, and they will actually enjoy the challenging experience. Prompts get the process going. A common one is, "Tell the story of your name," which rouses themes such as love, family, slavery, gender, and more. The conversations become intimate. Another prompt is, "Talk about the first time you noticed race as an issue." This is sometimes painful. Sometimes, white people don't have a story—and that becomes a teachable moment. From there, *The Welcome Table* goes deeper, screening films on implicit bias and providing a space for sharing the personal impacts bias has had on participants.

The *Welcome Table* can be a one- or two-year process of monthly meetings, and local tables move beyond conversation and work on shared projects together and develop an equity plan. One table included a group of Vietnamese immigrants who fished on the Gulf Coast and whose livelihoods were decimated after the Deep Horizon oil spill. After the community came together to share and problem-solve, for the first time the fishermen were invited to join the powerful oyster council to continue to help make decisions for the region. Tables have also been held for school personnel, police, and legislators, among others.

SOCIAL CONTACT THEORY

Gordon Allport developed contact theory in the 1950s, finding that working together on a shared goal was the best way to reduce prejudice among people of different backgrounds. Under the right conditions, anxieties people may have about each other will subside and deeper relationships will form. Some of the prerequisites for effective contact include encounters in which participants have equal status, work on common goals without competition, and have opportunities for personal interaction. While social psychologists agree on the importance of contact theory, less consensus exists on how much contact is needed to spur individual attitudinal change, what level of contact is meaningful, and a host of other specifics. Most would agree that more-frequent contact and deeper contact are best, but contact building efforts face a number of hurdles, including their time and resource intensity.

We also know from social psychology that people identify with their in-groups (social groups they feel membership in) and not with out-groups (groups they aren't members of and may even regard as a threat to their in-group). For example, when people are on the same sports team or fighting a common enemy on the battlefield, they become part of the same in-group and have an affinity for each other. For welcoming work, a focus on building diverse collaborations and working together on shared goals, rather than increasing competition, shows most promise. While most contact building work is designed for impact at the individual level, to reach significant scale and to influence pervasive in-group versus out-group dynamics that are a feature of the heightened polarization in the U.S. today, more work should happen at the group level.

"While *The Welcome Table* may not attract people with the greatest prejudices, building a multi-racial group is always complex—there are always different political ideologies and opinions, and there is always so much participants can learn from each other and work on together."

— APRIL GRAYSON

William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation

BUILDING CONNECTIONS ACROSS RELIGION: SISTERHOOD OF SALAAM SHALOM

Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom (SOSS) was created to fight and prevent hate and is purposefully grounded in contact theory research. Recognizing that Jews and Muslims are victims of hate, and also of ignorance and mistrust due to a lack of connectivity between them and the long-lasting Israel-Palestine conflict, the Jewish and Muslim co-founders of SOSS launched its charter chapter to bring a group of women together from both faiths. Today, there are more than 120 chapters across the country and 5 teen-girl chapters. What unites the women is their shared goal to end the hate and find strength in relationship and shared humanity. The chapters range in size from 8 to 20 women, evenly divided across the two religions. They meet in members' homes every 4 to 6 weeks for dialogue, social action, and socialization. Each chapter has Jewish and Muslim co-leaders, and uses a SOSS curriculum and guidebook. Together, participants learn how to engage in dialogue rather than debate, facilitate difficult conversations, celebrate holidays together, and fight hate and bigotry. After participants have established strong relationships, they are then able to wade into more controversial topics, such as Israel-Palestine policy, always guided by the SOSS curriculum. Chapter members also receive opportunities to attend the SOSS national conference and to travel on study tours, such as a trip to the southern U.S. to learn about the civil rights movement, meet with women civil rights leaders, and take those lessons learned back home in their battle against hate.

“It is easy to hate someone you do not know. When you know them, it is harder to hate them, and when you really care about them, it makes it almost impossible to hate.”

—**SHERYL OLITZKY**
Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom

ENGAGING THOSE WITH OPPOSING VIEWS ON CONTENTIOUS ISSUES: **NARRATIVE 4**

Narrative 4 is an effort to bring those with different backgrounds, and sometimes opposing viewpoints, into conversation with each other. The program was launched in Ireland in 2012 by writer Colum McCann and was brought to the U.S. when a teacher from Sandy Hook, Connecticut, wanted to find ways to use the power of story to help the community heal following the horrific shooting at a local elementary school in 2012. Narrative 4 has since expanded to use artists, educators, and trained facilitators to help build bridges and create greater empathy around five areas of possible disagreement and conflict: environment, identity, immigration, faith, and violence.

“If people are willing to come into an exchange, it will be transformative.”

—**DAWN DUNCAN**
Narrative 4

One master facilitator, Dawn Duncan, used Narrative 4's methodology in her hometown of Fargo, North Dakota, to promote greater understanding of the changing demographics in the area and to engage community members in one-on-one story exchanges. These exchanges are a highly structured way to bring people together for sharing and learning about each other to build sustainable relationships. Dawn spent significant time at the onset carefully pairing people from different backgrounds for participation. Before launching exchanges, she personally built a relationship with each individual involved, working to get to know them and ensuring they felt valued. Core principles behind the exchanges include: no debate or argument; all perspectives are valued; the importance of opening your mind to new perspectives if you want to solve problems; and the need to build real trust with people before and during the story exchange. While participants work in pairs initially to have these deep conversations, they then engage with a much larger group to develop commitments. Many have found the experience to be transformational and continue to sustain their new relationships.

USING DIALOGUE JOURNALISM TO SPARK CONVERSATIONS: **SPACESHIP MEDIA**

Spaceship Media uses a new model of dialogue journalism that dives into the heart of conflict, and rather than just reporting out on different opinions, it uncovers opportunities for conversations and learning. This dialogue journalism model begins with finding out what the community wants to know about, bringing people together in virtual conversations on that topic, and sharing stories that came out of those discussions more broadly, all to support dialogue across difference.

One Spaceship Media project brought together female Trump supporters from Alabama with female Clinton supporters in the Bay Area of California. They used local media reporter partners to help recruit 60 participants—30 from each state. The idea was to appeal to those who held different views but were interested in respectful dialogue. The project’s pre-work included conducting one-on-one interviews with each participant to get to know them better, asking questions such as, “What do you think the other community thinks of you?” “What do you think of the other community?” “What do you want them to know about you?” and “What do you want to know about them?” Many stereotypes emerge through this process and are shared openly so they can be addressed. The next stage is the online conversation. Spaceship Media moderates the private conversation between the two groups, typically over Facebook. People begin by introducing themselves and getting to know each other. As questions arise in their conversations, journalists work to answer them. For instance, many in the Alabama group reported they had voted for Trump based on his rejection of Obamacare. Journalists were able to share additional research to answer questions around this policy, including disseminating data on how many more people had insurance based on Obamacare. On the flip side, they also showed how much that insurance was costing people—sometimes more than their mortgage payment. Having this type of data available helped participants make sense of each other’s perceptions. After a month-long Facebook conversation, 32 of the women decided to continue their conversations and have established their own private group, where they are discussing a range of topics, including Civil War monuments and the #MeToo movement. Some have arranged to meet face-to-face. A video with participant testimonials shares more broadly the personal impact the project has made, and Spaceship Media is looking for new partners and cities to work in.

Other Promising Models to Explore

HIGHER EDUCATION

Campus Compact helps colleges and universities, which can be political battlegrounds, de-escalate tensions. Faculty are often concerned about how to manage classroom conversations and navigate the boundaries between free speech and hate speech. What happens, for instance, when a student wears a Trump hat to class and sits next to a student with DACA status? Institutions of higher education, ranging from Yale University to The Citadel have found students are hungry for an open space to explore their differences through meaningful dialogue.

ARTS AND CULTURE

While the impact of the arts on health and therapy is already well known, the arts also have the ability to create empathy through bridging and bonding experiences that connect people. Based in the small city of Winona, Minnesota, **Project Fine** brings its diverse community together to participate in hands-on art activities from various cultures, such as Mexican tiles, Native American dream catchers, and Hmong baskets. Participants come from all walks of life. As they learn a new art form together, relationships and cross-cultural friendships form and everyone has equal status. Project Fine’s main arts event of the year involved more than 1,800 community members, a significant feat for a city population of 27,000.

“Not far beneath polarization is a deep desire to connect. The state of discord when we can’t talk to co-workers, family, or neighbors is unhealthy for everyone. We provide participants with an opportunity to learn what they actually agree on and to develop a greater understanding and respect for different point of views.”

—EVE PEARLMAN
Spaceship Media

ARAB AMERICANS BRIDGING DIVIDES ACROSS RACE AND ETHNICITY

Nadia Tordova of **ACCESS** works to create a more just and equitable society, with the full participation of Arab Americans. To do so, she actively works to build cohesion among the diverse Arab American community across various divides—including religious, political, gender, class, and immigration status—in order to build more unity within the community. Her work focuses on organizing around common issues and educating the community on the struggles of others. Nadia also works to build relationships across communities of color, so that together people can work on equity and the roots of structural racism. “There are broad-based issues like civil rights, political representation, education, opiate use, and having good access to services, that many people can find common ground on. We focus on those areas of shared interest and shared values,” says Nadia.

Mixed Blood Theater works to create an audience and community of people in the Minneapolis area who aren't typically engaged in theater or the arts. Their Radical Hospitality approach provides no-cost admission to anyone and helps overcome other barriers to theatergoing, such as transportation. Mixed Blood takes on themes of inclusion in its productions. Example topics include injustice and cultural conflicts, and the theater works with specific communities such as Latinos, transgender individuals, and those with disabilities to use art as a tool for expression, civic engagement, and health.

Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM) is a refugee resettlement agency working to make the state a home for refugees and foster greater community connections. Recognizing the universal language of the arts, they have a long history of collaborating with arts organizations such as the local museum, opera, ballet, library, and more. Their latest effort, "Art Makes Home," is an initiative to foster arts collaboration between U.S. and foreign-born community members, focusing on their histories and cultures, and creating an archive of artistic talent including visual, dance, music, multimedia and other art forms. This art will be showcased throughout the community, such as in grocery stores and libraries.

CIVIC DIALOGUE

Better Angels works to help people understand those with different political points of view and uncover shared values. They divide participants into "reds" and "blues" (groups based on their political beliefs), and conduct fishbowl exercises in which one group converses together in the middle of the circle while the other group sits around the perimeter observing. The inside group discusses their perspectives and the stereotypes they think the other side holds of them, giving people an opportunity to hear the other group's articulation of their philosophy. Then the outside group presents what they learned from listening to the conversation, including the stereotypes that were discussed. Participants learn practical skills for speaking across political divides, including how to articulate emotions and passions in ways that aren't demonizing. They also report that they aren't as divided as they had thought.

DIALOGUE AND SERVICE

OneAmerica Movement frequently works across faith groups, bringing evangelicals, Muslims, and Mormons together to promote a narrative of respect. OneAmerica's model begins by having participants work together on a joint service project, such as helping in a soup kitchen, followed by eating a meal together and then participating in a dialogue. In this way, the dialogue builds off of shared experience and is more conducive to relationship building. One of the first exercises they conduct is asking each participant to write down a question about the other faith that they're too embarrassed to ask. This breaks the ice and helps get to the heart of misunderstandings. Many dialogue groups continue and take on longer-term service projects together, helping make these relationships stick. Participants report having their own points of view challenged and developing more respect for other religions. OneAmerica has used this methodology beyond religion, engaging the NAACP and police, for instance, and are open to partnerships in other communities that want to host similar events.

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS

Know Your Classmates is a back-to-school K-12 educational program led by *Beyond Differences*, which works to promote social inclusivity in schools. Now in its third year and used by more than 1,300 schools, Know Your Classmates helps students learn about, share, and understand their own and each other's identities. The effort began by addressing anti-Muslim sentiment and has since expanded with lesson plans focusing on inclusion across differences, including undocumented, LGBTQ, and transgender students, and other diverse identities. Recognizing that there's no better time to get to know your classmates than back to school, the program curriculum includes eight teacher lesson plans and three student leadership activities. Every school is served for free, with materials available on their online portal.

LANGUAGE LEARNING

Intercambio Uniting Communities pairs English-speaking volunteers with adult language learners. With a sensitivity towards not reinforcing privilege or hierarchy, Intercambio has worked hard over the years to move out of a charity model, choosing to reinforce a model in which everyone is teaching and is being taught. While much of their work involves one-on-one tutoring,

they also host a number of larger-scale-conversation events that bring together 30 to 40 volunteers to practice speaking English with adult students. Each volunteer speaks one-on-one with a student for about 15 to 20 minutes, and then they rotate students. Intercambio found that when they had open events with less structure, volunteers and participants would naturally gravitate to the people they already knew. Having a structured event in which people can talk openly but are assigned people to talk to has been far more effective in developing new relationships.

FOOD

The Idaho Office for Refugees works with a number of upscale Boise-area restaurants that agree to host and open their kitchens to a refugee chef during [Refugee Restaurant Week](#). Chefs create a special menu for the week reflective of their country of origin. Patrons sample new foods and learn about the chefs' backgrounds, with 10% of the restaurant proceeds being donated back to the refugee chefs. Many people with little understanding of refugees in Boise have been reached in this way.

Recommendations for Contact Building Work

We conclude with recommendations for new and experienced practitioners alike that reflect the lessons learned from many of the models featured in this paper. Additional recommendations are also forwarded for leaders who have an interest in expanding and sustaining this body of work so that it becomes more widespread and impactful.

FOR PRACTITIONERS

Contact building efforts are typically time and resource intensive. To make them worthwhile, consider the following:

- **Make a commitment to contact building work.** Despite their time and resource intensiveness, good contact building activities are worth the investment. They are much more likely to lead to meaningful attitude and behavior change among the new, unengaged audiences you are trying to reach than more traditional, and hands-off, models such as publications or presentations. Take a thoughtful approach to contact building and invest the time on the front end, finding ways to weave it into your existing programs and projects, and expanding your reach to new audiences over time.
- **Know your audience.** Find ways to build connections around the activities or topics your audience cares about and in which they want to engage. If a significant amount of time needs to be spent selling an opportunity, it's probably not the right one. Make sure to build trust with your audience. Dialogues in particular may be seen as liberal endeavors designed to change participants' viewpoints, so set them up to be nonpartisan and inclusive in order to attract those from across the political spectrum. For more ideas on how to build an inclusive dialogue, see Welcoming America's [Building Meaningful Contact: A How-To Guide](#).
- **Partner with trusted institutions.** In order to reach those who might benefit most from a transformational experience, build in extra time and resources for event planning to develop partnerships with the institutions your audience trusts and accesses. Faith, veteran, educational, and cultural institutions can help you reach a broader audience. It's important to build in more planning time to engage those with politically diverse viewpoints.
- **Listen to your audience** to understand where they are coming from and design an opportunity that meets them where they are. Take time to develop a safe and comfortable environment so that more challenging issues such as race can be addressed. Explicit and implicit biases are usually best addressed once a relationship has been established across participants.
- **Tackle shared challenges together.** Whether the issue is accessing childcare, creating a community park, expanding health services, or something else, working side-by-side on a common cause provides an opportunity for transformational experiences to take hold.

- **Promote equal footing.** Contact building works best when participants are avoiding the charity model and “doing for others.” It’s advisable to promote situations in which all people have equal status, something to contribute, and are in a collaborative, not competitive, environment.
- **Be mindful of participants’ time.** Make the most of participants’ time. If some are getting paid by their employers to participate, think about stipends for others whose time is also valuable. Schedule activities for times when all people can attend—perhaps on the weekends or evenings. Remember that many community leaders, especially from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, receive many requests to participate in events. Be mindful of their time and respectful of your requests.

FOR POLICYMAKERS, PHILANTHROPY, AND THOSE TRYING TO ADVANCE THE SOCIAL COHESION FIELD

- **Invest.** Contact building work needs greater investment. Relationships are the building blocks for social cohesion, and yet most of this work is conducted with extremely limited resources and is far from being at scale. These efforts are too important to rely on minimal investments. They need resources in order to be sustained and to grow.
- **Research.** More research is needed to fully understand the conditions under which contact building has the greatest long-term impact. The conditions, frequency, and depth of contact building needed to lead to long-term attitudinal change still require further exploration.
- **Model.** Leaders in organizations and movements of all kinds can model bridge building behavior by working across the political spectrum, engaging unusual allies, and sharing success stories of how they have come together across difference to help advance inclusion across a range of different policy issues.

Concluding Thoughts

Welcoming America works with local governments and nonprofits that are trying to promote welcoming, inclusive communities where all people can thrive. We believe that promoting social cohesion, or connected communities, is a key factor in a welcoming community. The models featured in this paper, and other approaches similar in nature, show promise in helping to build those connections. Through Welcoming America’s technical assistance and training, we are working to help communities adopt contact building approaches like these and to create the kinds of conditions in which these projects might more fully scale.

For more ideas and background from Welcoming America on building meaningful contact, we recommend these resources:

[*Building Meaningful Contact: A How To Guide*](#)

[*Building Cohesive Communities in an Era of Migration and Change*](#)

[*Welcoming Week Toolkit*](#)

[*Receiving Communities Toolkit*](#)

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