

Opinion: Supporting immigrants is the key to our country's success

By Frank Wu
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Though I am not an immigrant, I am the child of newcomers to this great nation. My parents were scholarship students who put down new roots. They made good, becoming citizens, taxpayers, parents and grandparents of native-born generations who contribute and make their home on this side of the Pacific Ocean. American higher education has been the catalyst for my growth. I share this personal background because it is reflective of many who have benefited from opportunities extended to us by the United States. It is important to ensure other families, like mine, will be able to pursue and achieve the proverbial American Dream, which continues to beckon the world over even if it may be cast into doubt at home.

As a scholar and teacher, I have studied and shared about the processes of global migration. Among the complexities of human nature is our ability to hold contradictory opinions. Even people who oppose policies that allow increased numbers to join our society generally are enthusiastic about individuals whom they have come to know, be it the shopkeeper who runs the bodega or deli down the street or a neighbor whose kids play with one's own.

So there are two different arguments to be made about supporting immigrants, of whatever status, as Queens College does. The first



Frank Wu is the president of Queens College. Photo via Queens College

argument is based on civil rights advocacy. The second argument is a so-called “business case.” People who might not be persuaded by statistics can be won over by stories. A diverse democracy depends on dialogue and opportunities to debate issues.

Idealism was once compelling, and perhaps despite the divisiveness promoted by the Internet, it can be once again. Most immigrants today, in particular those like my parents in terms of their national origin, are able to secure their green cards thanks to the federal 1965 Immi-

gration and Nationality Act. That legislation, an homage to the late President John F. Kennedy and part of the package of the “Great Society” championed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, eliminated the vestiges of the nativist system that was openly based on racial quotas. The profound legal change had an antecedent: The Civil Rights Act of 1964. The culmination of the historic struggle for Black equality, that bill similarly prohibited what had been normal before — segregation, both official and informal. These companion laws remade almost all aspects of American life. They enacted the values we espoused and encouraged others to put into practice.

Yet there are those who are practical, concerned about the economy and their own prospects to improve their lot in life. Demagogues have long tried to blame outsiders or those perceived as not belonging, even if they have been on these shores since birth or a very young age, for taking jobs or spreading disease, or even for speaking their own language as they walk down the street. The data are as clear as can be: The fact is that people who were not Americans at birth but who arrive here from elsewhere give back more than they take away. As entrepreneurs, they create companies, which means jobs; as professors, they perform scientific research that helps humanity; as artists, they write novels, paint canvasses, design buildings, and

dance; as enlistees in our military, they fight for the side to which they have come. This is our advantage in the world. People fleeing persecution or war, poverty, or even climate change, can and do, one and all, turn into members of our body politic — certainly their progeny do — passionately.

Queens College was founded for a purpose. It came together with sister institutions to form The City University of New York system to better fulfill its function: to improve the lot in life of ordinary New Yorkers, include those who are “New” New Yorkers, folks who renewed a magnificent metropolis after the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Queens College has federal designations for being “Hispanic-serving” and “Asian American/Pacific Islander-serving.” Our enrollment is about one third immigrant, like my parents; about one third the children of newcomers, like me. I tell our incoming classes that my family is like theirs. I am lucky to have my dream job. I am proud of our graduates. They represent a unique experiment in the annals of history, a place of communities bound together by principle rather than blood.

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