

SECOND PLACE ESSAY

Reforming the United States Immigration Policy

by Rachel Kocik

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. In this issue, we feature the three prize-winning essays as the Margaret Chase Smith Essay. The 2015 essay prompt asked students to weigh in with their opinions about what current U.S. immigration policy should be in light of the historical backdrop of alternating cycles of welcome and wariness toward foreigners. Second place prize winner Rachel Kocik discusses some of the many benefits immigrants bring to the United States, while acknowledging that there are still some knotty legal problems that need to be resolved.

“We didn’t raise the Statue of Liberty with her back to the world, we did it with her light shining as a beacon to the world. And whether we were Irish or Italians or Germans crossing the Atlantic, or Japanese or Chinese crossing the Pacific; whether we crossed the Rio Grande or flew here from all over the world—generations of immigrants have made this country into what it is. It’s what makes us special.” President Obama spoke these words at Del Sol High School in Las Vegas, Nevada. He was speaking about immigration, an issue about which most Americans have strong feelings. Whether one is for or against immigration, there can be no argument—the United States needs immigration reform. In 2012, 40.7 million immigrants made up 13 percent of the U.S. population, with 11.3 million of these considered unauthorized immigrants (CAP 2014). This staggering number of immigrants shows the need for change. To reform immigration in the United States, the stigma surrounding immigrants needs to be eliminated and

the process of becoming a legal American citizen needs to be more attainable.

Immigrants, not just unauthorized ones, face stereotyping and prejudice on a daily basis. They are accused of stealing jobs, avoiding taxes, and causing economic strain. They are called derogatory terms, such as “alien,” considered heinous criminals, and discriminated against simply because they are immigrants. Most of these accusations, however, are unsubstantiated and wrong. Immigrants contribute to the economy and allow it to grow. The U.S. economy is based on growth; if the economy is not growing at the proper rate, then the nation as a whole suffers. Our economy is driven by the circulation of money and goods throughout it, which comes in the form of consumers making money from jobs. Therefore, as our economy continues to grow and jobs are created, our population must also increase.

According to an episode of the PBS television show *NOVA* (“The Impact of Aging”), Japan and Italy are facing severe

economic peril due to a shrinking, aging population and low birth rates. With fewer people to spend money as consumers and fewer young people to care for the aging population and fill jobs, both countries have begun to see their economies shrink. A shrinking economy is not a healthy economy, and in the future this will likely lead to more severe fiscal problems than have already been seen. Coupling fiscal and economic problems with the inevitable social strife that will result, a shrinking population is certainly not healthy or beneficial for anyone. Immigrants coming into the United States help our economy to maintain its growth. If more Americans were educated and aware of this fact, perhaps their views on immigrants stealing jobs and damaging the economy would be dispelled and the stigma would dissolve.

Unauthorized immigrants are also blamed for evading taxes. Some feel that immigrants do not pay taxes, yet still receive services that taxes provide such as a public education. This is largely untrue. For example, in 2010 undocumented immigrants paid an estimated \$10.6 billion dollars in taxes, including income, property, and sales taxes, while many are denied certain social services (CAP 2014). These facts render the belief that illegal immigrants are hindrances who have come to the United States for food stamps and handouts simply untrue. Native-born Americans need to be educated on the realities of immigration in the United States. A simple factual analysis would shed light on a largely unknown aspect of the United States and would no doubt reduce the prejudice that immigrants, whether they are legal or not, face on a regular basis.

If discrimination surrounding immigrants were removed and native-born Americans were more accepting of them, then obtaining citizenship could be made easier and more accessible to immigrants. Getting a green card, which permanently

authorizes an immigrant to live and work in the United States, is currently very hard. According to a report on ABC News (July 3, 2014), becoming an American citizen can be expensive, as immigration lawyers' fees typically range from \$5,000 to \$15,000. The process is lengthy too, with some people waiting several years before they receive an answer. Immigrants also find that it is difficult to track their citizenship status once they have applied. The uncertainty, in addition to the expense and time, could make it a disheartening process.

A more straightforward immigration process would help encourage lawful immigration, which would also lead to more immigrants. The United States would likely have to raise the current cap of 675,000 legal immigrants per year to a higher number (AIC 2014). Considering the number of illegal immigrants already in the United States, if obtaining citizenship was easier, fewer illegal immigrants and more legal ones would enter the country. By making more citizens legal, we would see a favorable outcome for our economy. Wages would increase overall. Illegal immigrants, who would no longer hold that status, would be paid at least minimum wage for their work, which would likely bolster wages across the nation (CAP 2014). An increase of wages would lead to more money being circulated through the economy. Increased spending and consumption drives our economy and would be beneficial. More immigrants would also be able to pay taxes and pay for social security and help decrease the deficit (CAP 2014). Expanding the number of legal immigrants would result in positive economic growth and more government services.

However, this still does not resolve the problems of millions of undocumented immigrants still in the United States, who cannot apply for a green card for fear of being deported. These immigrants will not return to their

native countries on their own, and they will not turn themselves in for being in the United States illegally. There are limited ways to resolve this problem; the two most obvious are to make all of the unauthorized immigrants citizens or to find and deport all of the illegal immigrants. I believe that a compromise could be reached. Law-abiding, contributing members of society, even if they are in the country illegally, should be able to secure citizenship. That way they will be able to pay taxes, receive benefits, and live and work in a safe environment. Criminals, on the other hand, should not be afforded citizenship. People convicted of a serious crime—in the United States or in their own country—should be deported. In this way, legal immigrants would almost exclusively be productive members of society, and crime rates would be lowered.

Despite these favorable results, some argue that allowing more immigrants would simply encourage more undesirable people to legally enter the United States and would let those who illegally entered the United States get off scot-free. However, not only is it unrealistic to think that millions of illegal immigrants could be deported, but most of these men and women have come to the United States with good intentions. Incarcerating them would be a waste of money and would contribute to the already broken and overcrowded U.S. prison system (OSF 2013). In addition, the enormity of the task of finding these immigrants makes it nearly impossible. Tens of thousands of hours would need to be devoted to this job, and there are simply better uses of time and money.

Reform needs to come to the current United States immigration policy to remove the stigma and stereotypes surrounding immigrants and to allow a greater number of immigrants to more easily obtain lawful citizenship. Understanding that immigrants—even

illegal ones—help the United States is the first step to reform. This needs to be followed by an overhaul of the green card and citizenship process to make it cheaper, more efficient, and more attainable; then, the United States would have a successful, positive immigration policy. It still has a long way to go, but I am confident that with education, compassion, and reform, the United States will afford all immigrants the opportunity to fulfill their own American Dreams. 🐼

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Rachel Kocik of Hampden Academy was the second place winner. She is attending the University of Pittsburgh where she plans to

major in bio-engineering. In high school, she was on the math team, played ice hockey, was a writing tutor, and was instrumental in establishing JCL, Junior Classical League, to encourage interest in the language, literature, and culture of ancient Greece and Rome.