

Teaching Family Science Students about Immigrant Families in the U.S.: A Course to Reflect the Diversity of the Immigrant Population

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ABSTRACT. Working with immigrant families in a globalized world requires a deep understanding of the multidimensional experience of immigration as it unfolds over the course of the immigrant's life. Family science students need to be aware of the diversity of immigrants and be knowledgeable about immigrant family dynamics across generations and among diverse ethnic groups. In this paper, I share my ideas for developing and teaching an *Immigrant Families* course to family science students. I provide my teaching approach, course objectives, content and scope of the course, as well as examples of required readings and course assignments. My recommendations may be useful to instructors interested in introducing such a course into their family science programs or to those who wish to incorporate information on immigrant families into existing courses in order to strengthen students' employability and increase their cultural sensitivity as future practitioners and scholars.

Keywords: immigrant families, diversity, immigration, family science

Family science students are well aware that the United States is a diverse, multicultural society, comprised of immigrants and their descendants. During their studies students take required courses on cultural diversity and read textbooks with chapters on diverse families that contain descriptions of select ethnic groups. Nevertheless, how much do our students know about contemporary immigrant families in the United States and migration as a global phenomenon? Do we do enough to prepare them to work with this population and become culturally sensitive practitioners and future scholars? Based on my experience with students who are growing up in the state of New Jersey, where immigrants comprise 20% of the population compared to 13% nationally (U.S. Census, 2012), I argue that we need to do a better job preparing them to work with immigrant families. To begin this conversation, I will share my experience of developing and teaching an elective course, entitled *Immigrant Families*, in a Family and Child Studies program. I will describe the content and the scope of this course, outline my approach and

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philosophy of teaching this class, share course readings and assignments, and provide students' quotes to illustrate their learning.

Developing a Course on U.S. Immigrant Families

I would like to start by sharing several representative comments from my students that reflect what they thought about immigrant families prior to taking this class and how their perceptions changed at the end of semester. The quotes throughout this paper come from informal written evaluations collected over three semesters from a total of ninety undergraduate students majoring in Family and Child Studies who were enrolled in *Immigrant Families*.

To be completely honest, my assumption of this class was a Latino professor talking about crossing borders and how to teach ESL students. However, this class really showed me the true diversity of the immigrant population in the U.S. and the complex family dynamics –issues with languages, parenting, ethnic identity, biculturalism, generational and cultural gaps. (Student #21)

I like how U.S. immigrant families were also placed in the context of the larger world and the global migration, learning about immigrants in Canada, Australia, and Europe. I never heard about transnational families, global care chains, Blue Card, and brain drain before. It was fascinating! (Student #14)

I went into this class with a preconceived idea, and I am leaving with a whole different outlook on immigrants. If I went into teaching with my original assumptions, I would not be able to fully help students from immigrant families. This should be a required class for future teachers and family service professionals. (Student #78)

I value my students' self-reflection and appreciate their honesty in admitting their ignorance and misconceptions about the topic. Our students' thinking and perceptions of immigrant families reflect the current discourse on immigration in the United States, shaped by the media coverage of sensationalized stories about illegal immigrants, partisan politics and immigration reform, and the overall portrayal of immigrants as a homogeneous group with little recognition of their enormous diversity. This is a call for family science educators to reevaluate our curriculum and infuse it with classes and topics that would help our graduates learn about the diversity of the immigrant population in the U.S. and become prepared for employment in a globalized world.

Course Description and Objectives

Immigrant Families is focused on contemporary immigrant families in the United States. The purpose is to critically examine immigrant family dynamics across generations and over

time, using classic and new acculturation theories in the context of global migration and transnationalism. Students explore multiple topics related to immigrant families: family adaptation, changes in parent-child relationships, heritage language maintenance and loss, youths' ethnic identity development, intergenerational relationships, dating and mate selection, education, and interactions with social institutions. Students analyze how such factors as ethnicity, gender, class, migration goals, legal status, human capital, English proficiency, generational status, age at migration, country of origin, and areas of settlement shape the experiences of immigrant families. Below are the course objectives:

- Demonstrate critical understanding of the diversity of contemporary immigrants in the U.S. and the multiple factors that influence their adaptation.
- Critically analyze immigrant family dynamics and investigate issues related to acculturation in the context of family life across generations and over time.
- Discuss similarities and differences of adaptation among various immigrant groups in the U.S. using classic and contemporary models of immigrant acculturation.
- Consider cultural, ethnic, gender, familial, socioeconomic, and legal factors that influence immigrant adaptation and acculturation.
- Explore personal beliefs and biases related to immigrant families and develop cultural competency for working with immigrant families.

A Family-Focused and Topical Approach to Teaching about Immigration

As a family scientist, I approach teaching about immigration by focusing on the family system, and how it changes in response to immigration over time as immigrants acculturate and adapt to their host culture. Immigration should be viewed not as a single event, but as a journey that unfolds over the life course and impacts both the nuclear and extended family in the host country and the country of origin (Sherif Trask, Brady, Qiu, & Radnai-Griffin, 2009). What changes occur in the family following immigration? How does immigration influence intergenerational relationships, parenting strategies, transmission of heritage language and culture, and ethnic identity development? How do different immigrant generations within a family experience acculturation? What is the role of the original culture and how does it affect immigrant groups in the host society? Which individual, familial, and societal factors influence the outcomes?

These questions can be answered more fully if we approach the study of immigrant families in a topical way, rather than focusing on separate ethnic groups from different regions or countries of origin. For example, when discussing parenting in immigration, students are assigned qualitative studies on different immigrant groups: West Indians (Waters & Sykes, 2009) and Eastern Europeans (Nesteruk & Marks, 2011). Both studies examine immigrant parents' beliefs, attitudes, and practices related to parenting in a new context. We, thus, have an opportunity to learn about and compare two immigrant groups in the U.S. that are dealing with a similar issue (parenting) and explore the influence of their original cultures on their current behaviors. When we talk about dating and mate selection, students have a choice to read two of the following three selections: (a) an article (Manohar, 2008) on dating in an Indian community that explores different attitudes towards dating and marriage among first- and second-generation Indian immigrants, secrecy in dating, pressures to marry co-ethnics, and issues of bicultural

identity; (b) a chapter (Espiritu, 2009) that describes gender double standards and intergenerational conflicts related to dating and sexuality in Filipino families; and (c) a study (Nesteruk & Gramescu, 2012) on dating and mate selection among second-generation young adults from different cultures that discusses parental expectations, the roles of gender, birth order, and length of residency in the U.S., and immigrant youths' preferences for marriage partners. Together, these articles allow students to explore many variables and factors related to dating, acculturation, and family dynamics among different ethnic groups, as experienced by different generations in immigrant families. These are just two examples of how issues in immigrant families can be explored in a topical way through assigned readings on a variety of ethnic groups.

I did not find one suitable textbook for this class; therefore I relied on selected chapters from the edited book by Foner (2009) and a number of qualitative research articles. By choosing articles that contain participants' quotes and rich descriptions of immigrants' experiences, one can bring fascinating stories to the classroom without having to arrange for many guest speakers. Each time I taught this course, I asked students to rank their top three and bottom three readings from the semester and adjusted the reading list for future students. Qualitative research articles can be a great reading resource, one that is easily accessible via university library databases, is free of charge for students, and is flexible to include the most recent studies to fit the interests of the instructor and the students.

Content and Scope of the Course

As mentioned earlier, the course is focused on contemporary immigrants, those who immigrated to the U.S. following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated national-origins quotas and gave preference to skilled workers and relatives of U.S. citizens. Immigrants that arrived after 1965 are commonly referred to as the "new" immigrants, in contrast to the "old" immigrants in the early 1900s (Waters & Ueda, 2007). In the introductory lecture, we cover the "old" immigrants from the 1900s, when Europeans represented 86% of all immigrants in the U.S. and came primarily through Ellis Island. This information helps students appreciate how the sending regions of the "new" immigrants changed over time: currently, 53% of immigrants in the U.S. have origins in Latin America, 28% in Asia, 12% in Europe, and 4% in Africa (U.S. Census, 2012).

Number of immigrants. There are over 40 million immigrants in the U.S., who represent 13% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2012). Although this appears to be a large population in absolute numbers, percentage-wise the peak of immigration in this country was in 1910, when almost 15% of the population was foreign-born. From the cross-cultural perspective, the United States is not the only immigrant society: Canada's immigrants represent 21% of its population (Statistics Canada, 2013) and Australia's foreign-born make up 27% of the total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Before providing students with these statistics, first ask them to guess how many immigrants live in the U.S. and what proportion of the U.S. population they represent, as well as what the population of the United States is. Their answers will surprise and sadden you. For this activity, I project a U.S. and World Population Clock from the U.S. Census Bureau (2014) that displays, in real time, the estimates of the U.S. population and the components of this change through births, deaths, and international migration.

This is a great teaching tool for visual learners and helps students remember these important statistics.

Who is considered an immigrant? In order to be informed citizens and effective family services professionals, students need to know who is considered an immigrant, why people migrate (push and pull factors), how the legal system works, and what factors influence immigrants' adaptation. Students often do not realize that the term "immigrant" and the statistics on immigrants include many people: naturalized U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (those who have a green card), legal non-immigrants (e.g., persons on student or work visas), those admitted as refugees or those who are seeking asylum, as well as persons residing in the US illegally. A person's legal status can change, but what remains unchanged is the fact that she or he was born outside of the United States and, therefore, will always be considered an immigrant. I use my own example, describing how my legal status has changed over the last 15 years: I went from being a legal temporary visitor on a student visa, to a work visa, to becoming a lawful permanent resident (having a green card) to, finally, becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen.

Legal matters: Understanding the U.S. immigration system. This class has evolved in response to my students' questions, comments, and class discussions. One frequent question used to be, *Why don't the illegal immigrants just get their citizenships?* This is why I developed a lecture entitled *Legal Matters*, which covers the basics of the U.S. immigration law and educates students on the different ways of obtaining a green card through: (a) family reunification, (b) employment sponsorship, (c) humanitarian program as a refugee or asylum-seeker, or (d) Diversity Visa Lottery Program. We discuss many related issues: international travel and visa requirements; birthright citizenship and the controversy surrounding it; mixed-status families; dual citizenship; the naturalization process and what it involves (requirements, application, fees, interview, test of English and U.S. history and government). I bring to class my old Ukrainian passport to demonstrate what visas to different countries look like; I show images of what the green card looks like and discuss what rights and limitations come with it; and I display examples of immigration applications. As a class, we look at the questions from the civics test that foreign-born applicants have to pass during their naturalization interview (many students have a hard time answering these questions!). Collectively, these activities give students a better appreciation of what this process is like for the foreign-born, as illustrated by the following comment from a student:

I had no idea what is required of immigrants to come to this country, like paperwork and fees, and visas, etc. I thought anyone could come here with no problems. I assumed that people who came here illegally did not actually want to become citizens. Learning about the process immigrants have to go through to be able to live in America shocked me! I also enjoyed learning about what it takes to become an American citizen.
(Student #8)

Understanding the basics of the immigration system will help our students become more effective and compassionate practitioners.

Children in immigrant families. Family science students, who want to work with children and families need to be aware that 17 million children live in immigrant families (defined as having at least one foreign-born parent), which accounts for 24% of all children in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2012). The majority of these children are U.S. citizens. It is projected that by 2020, one in three children in the nation will live in an immigrant family (Mather, 2009). In some states, the share of children in immigrant families is already higher than this projection: 50% in California; 37% in Nevada; 34% in New York; 34% in Texas, and 33% in New Jersey (U.S. Census, 2012). In order to understand children from immigrant families, we should first consider their parents' migration experiences and socioeconomic characteristics. Such two-generational perspective should inform our understanding of the immigrant children's diverse circumstances, risk factors, language and educational outcomes, as well as overall well-being (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008; Mather, 2009).

Immigrant generations. Age at the time of immigration is an important factor to consider when interpreting the experiences of immigrant individuals and families (Sherif Trask et al., 2009; Waters & Ueda, 2007). First-generation immigrants are foreign-born individuals who immigrate to the United States as adults and often live with emotional attachment to two worlds. Their U.S.-born children are the second generation, socialized in the U.S. yet raised by the immigrant parents, both experiencing two (or three) cultures and having to deal with self-definition, ethnic identity formation, heritage language, and finding their place in community (e.g., Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Pyke, 2000; Wong Fillmore, 2000). The third, or "native," generation is comprised of the U.S.-born child of U.S.-born parent(s) or the grandchild of the first-generation immigrants. In most cases, much of their heritage from the first generation is lost. In addition, we should also consider the half generations and their immigration experiences. The 1.5-generation is comprised of foreign-born children brought to the U.S. before or during their early teens. They are in between the first and the second generations, not old enough to make the decision to immigrate, and not young enough to forget lives in their country of origin. Finally, the .5 generation—older individuals who are brought to the U.S. later in life by their adult children are discussed. Each of these immigrant generations will have their various strengths, vulnerabilities, and needs, and family practitioners should be made aware of them (Dalla, Defrain, Johnson, & Abbott, 2009).

Required readings offer insights into the diverse experiences of these immigrant generations. For instance, students read that the .5 generation makes many unrecognized contributions to the first and second generations through domestic work and caregiving (Treas & Mazumdar, 2004). Naturally, these later-life immigrants may experience the challenges of aging out of place as transplanted elders (Brown, 2009). Some students can now recognize a neighbor, a friend's grandmother, or their own grandfather in these descriptions. The concerns of the 1.5 generation are different, as students learn from an article by Stodolska (2008) about Korean, Mexican, and Polish adolescents trying to adapt to a new educational system in the U.S., navigate peer relationships, serve as language and culture brokers to their parents, and deal with intergenerational conflicts at home. Further, students read about young Korean-Americans (Park, 1999) struggling to construct their ethnic identity and a sense of belonging, juxtaposed against the experiences of the first and the second generations within their family.

Classification of immigrants. Immigrants can be further distinguished based on their personal resources and human capital (unskilled/semi-skilled laborers; professionals, managers, and skilled workers; and entrepreneurs); their legal status (legal temporary, legal permanent, or illegal/undocumented); their reasons for migrating; and their choice (voluntary economic migrants as opposed to refugees escaping their home countries' political/ethnic violence, wars, or environmental devastation) (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). These classifications of immigrants come to life when students learn about them in assigned readings: a case study of an African refugee family resettling in the U.S. (Vongkhamphra, Davis, & Adem, 2012), a chapter on mixed-status transnational families from Central America (Menjivar & Abrego, 2009), or an article about legal highly educated professionals from Eastern Europe (Nesteruk, 2010). Students can compare different immigrants' resources, life circumstances, strengths, challenges, and resulting adaptation. The experiences of these and other immigrant groups are further examined through the lens of classic straight-line assimilation theory (Gordon, 1964) and contemporary segmented assimilation theory (Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, & Haller, 2009), as well as acculturation strategies such as assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Berry, 2007).

Other diversity factors. These are just a few of the diversity factors influencing immigrants' adaptation that should be explored through course readings and discussions. Other diversity factors include, but are not limited to: reasons for immigration; occupation and social status before/ after immigration; rural/urban background before and after migration; race; gender; sexual orientation; original culture and host settlement region; religious beliefs; political and economic situation in the home country; available social support (ethnic/religious communities, family, friends, and social services); financial resources; availability of benefits; English proficiency; and length of residency in the United States. As we see, there are numerous factors and variables that distinguish immigrants and affect their experiences in the U.S. However, because immigrants are often "lumped together under statistical umbrellas" (Sherif Trask et al., 2009, p. 55), our students' understanding of immigrant individuals and families may be limited. Below is a representative quote from a student, reflecting how her understanding of the diversity among immigrants changed after taking the *Immigrant Families* course:

Before this course, I only heard stories about Hispanic immigration, and mostly illegal immigrants from the news. I always wondered why there was never much information about other immigrant groups, and assumed it was because all immigrants were the same. My perspective definitely changed after taking this class and I now understand just how diverse the immigrants are, based on their counties of origin, legal status, educational levels, knowledge of English, ethnic communities, and many other factors. (Student # 79)

Global perspective and transnational families. It is essential to provide students with a global perspective to help them better understand not only the current debate on immigration in the United States, but also how families are affected by migration globally. In the lecture titled *Globalization and Transnational Families*, students learn that over 232 million individuals (3.2% of the world population) are living outside of their native countries (United Nations Population Division, 2013), and that globalization, advances in communication and travel, as well as growing disparities within and between societies, change immigrants into transnationals (Sherif

Trask, 2010). Many of the students recognize that their own families are like those transnational families we read about in class (Louie, 2006; Stone, Gomez, Hotzoglou, & Lipnitsky, 2005)—families that reside and maintain significant contact in two or more countries, but retain a sense of belonging to each other and a feeling of collective welfare. When students learn about work and parenting across borders among Mexican immigrants (Dreby, 2009), legal instability and transnational parenting in Guatemalan and Salvadorian families (Menjivar & Abrego, 2009), and remittances and Global Care Chains (Hochschild, 2009);, they become less quick to criticize international migrants, many of whom are women, for leaving their children and working in another country in order to provide for them. We also discuss “brain drain” and its effects on the sending countries, the European Blue Card, secondary migration, and the reasons why immigrants may return home. By introducing the concept of globalization and its effects on families around the globe, we can expand students’ thinking about immigrant families, helping them to be better informed as they think about domestic and international issues.

Policy considerations. It is important that students learn that each nation has an immigration policy that determines how many immigrants are allowed and the selection criteria. Immigration can be examined for this purpose through the lens of two perspectives: immigrant-centric or national (Camarota, 2012). The immigrant-centric perspective focuses on immigrants’ adaptation over time and the benefits of migration to the immigrants themselves. The national perspective focuses on the impact of immigration on U.S. society and whether immigration benefits the existing population of American citizens (Camarota, 2012). Both approaches are vital for an informed discourse on immigration. A successful immigration system provides for legality and orderliness and allows each nation “to choose who should be admitted rather than ratifying the decisions of immigrants, their families, and their employers,” as has been the case in the U.S. for the last five decades (Papademetriou, 2013).

By using cross-cultural and global perspectives, we can provide family science students, whether they hold liberal, conservative, or moderate views, with opportunities to formulate a better informed position on the current immigration debate in the United States. When discussing immigration policy cross-culturally, we consider the example of Canada with its broad, point-based immigration system that gives preference to skilled economic migrants and favors young, educated, proficient in English/ French applicants with skills that the Canadian economy needs. Most of Canada’s green cards are given to economic migrants (62%) and fewer for family reunification (27%) (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013), which is almost the opposite of the current U.S. policy. Unlike the U.S., Canada also has a negligible number of illegal immigrants due, in part, to its permanent and temporary migration programs that respond to labor shortages in the economy, and provide legal channels for labor migrants and formal structures for their employers. The vast majority of Canadians trust their immigration system and view immigration as positive for their country and its economy (Challinor, 2011), a stark contrast to public opinion in the United States.

An intelligent, rational debate can take place in the classroom and in the larger society only after we understand the basics of immigration policies in the U.S. and globally. Otherwise, the discussion is bound to be uninformed and overly emotional. I remind students that although we cannot fix the U.S. immigration system, we should know how it currently works and how it can be improved. Finally, the goal of this class is to develop a better understanding of

contemporary immigrants in the U.S., their diversity, and the multiple factors that influence their adaptation. It is also important that students explore their personal beliefs and biases and develop cultural competency for working with immigrant families.

Course Assignments and Student Learning

Reading and blogging. Students are expected to complete assigned readings prior to class and to blog on-line throughout the semester to reflect on the new information (an alternative format would be writing reflection papers). When grading students' blogs, I look for a discussion of not only what they learned, liked, or disliked in the readings, but also their efforts in comparing and contrasting assigned readings. These are typically on the same topic, but involve different immigrant groups. I encourage students to use critical thinking by inviting their comments on how they can apply new knowledge, what they consider to be the strengths and limitations of the readings, and how the readings compare with what they already know or with popular discourse in society. I require students to provide quotes and specific examples from the readings to support their positions.

Interview with immigrant family. Students are required to interview two members of an immigrant family. They can be a couple, a parent and a child, a grandparent and a grandchild, siblings, or any other combination of family members. At least one of the interviewees has to be an immigrant, the other can be U.S.-born. In addition to asking basic demographic questions (age, country of origin, education, occupation, and family composition) and immigration history (e.g., year of immigration, reasons, and circumstances.), I ask students to prepare a list of specific questions that are based on class readings in order to explore immigrant family dynamics in depth. Students have the freedom to choose on what topics they want to focus, for example, acculturation, parenting, marriage, intergenerational relationships, heritage language, ethnic identity, dating, family roles and responsibilities, and kinship ties. In addition to writing a paper, students also deliver a class presentation, in which they share their interview findings with classmates and connect the experiences of their interviewees to class material. Reflecting on this assignment, students often say something similar to the following student comment: "Interviewing immigrants allowed me to reflect on how much I actually learned this semester and I felt like the class came full circle" (Student #23).

Videos. Since there are many videos on immigration, instructors have many choices of what they might show in class. I have two favorites. The first one is the History Channel's documentary *The Naturalized* (2010), which explores the stories of people from different backgrounds in the process of becoming U.S. citizens. This video provides a perfect illustration for the lecture *Legal Matters*. The second video is a movie entitled *The Namesake* (2007), based on the novel of the same name by Jhumpa Lahiri (2003). It tells the story of an Indian immigrant family in New York over two generations. The movie provides an engaging portrayal of the process of acculturation, the balancing of two cultures, and uses a lifecourse perspective to describe many topics in immigrant family dynamics.

Students' critical thinking and self-reflection. In addition to abovementioned assignments, students also take exams, prepare Current Event presentations, and participate in on-line and class discussions. Class discussions are especially valuable, particularly if classes

contain students with recent immigrant backgrounds who are willing to share their personal stories.

Combined, all of the class activities and assignments help students develop valuable self-reflection and critical thinking skills. Throughout this paper, I have shared many representative quotes that illustrate students' growing understanding of the diverse circumstances and experiences among immigrants. Students, who in the past declared their preparedness to work with diverse families, realize there is much more they need to learn to become culturally competent practitioners and scholars. Equipped with new knowledge and deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding immigrant families, students begin to think more critically about immigration discourse in society and develop greater sensitivity to individual lives. Here are two representative quotes from students: "Prior to this class, I had many assumptions and stereotypes about who the immigrants are" (Student #35), and "I thought that all the readings, assignments, and class discussions placed us in immigrant people's shoes, and made us appreciate all the heartaches, struggles, and obstacles as real as you were the one going through these problems" (Student #70).

Many students also report gaining a new appreciation of the people in their lives: "I did not realize how many of my friends were first, 1.5, and second generation immigrants! I talked about these articles with them and now understand them better" (student #2). Students from immigrant families frequently share their surprise at learning more about their family and report developing a different perspective on their own upbringing: "Although I come from an immigrant family, I realized that I knew little about what my parents went through, all the struggles and sacrifices to give me a better life. Now I have a different perspective on so many issues!" (student #38). Another common sentiment: "For the first time, I was able to relate my life experiences to a college class. It was wonderful! And I am also glad to know that my immigrant parents are not crazy!" (student #67). Such a comment reflects, in a humorous way, relief at the realization that one student's family issues are common for many other immigrant families. A Latina student wrote about her emerging affinity with other immigrants: "When I started this class, as a Mexican, I knew the struggles that immigrants had in this country. What I didn't expect was that many other people from different countries are also facing similar struggles" (student #51).

By the end of my *Immigrant Families* course, it is rewarding to see students relinquish their view of immigrants as a monolithic, homogeneous group and instead develop a deeper understanding of this population's tremendous diversity. Students begin to recognize immigrants among people in their lives--their family, peers, neighbors, co-workers, physicians, professors, housekeepers, taxi drivers, store greeters, landscapers--and now have a new appreciation of their strengths and compassion for their challenges. Instead of viewing immigration as an event, students also begin to think about immigration as a multidimensional experience affecting all members of an immigrant family over time.

Conclusion

In this paper, I shared the design of the course *Immigrant Families*, both from my perspective as a family scientist and as an immigrant in the United States. Different instructors will teach this type of course differently, emphasizing some topics over others, selecting readings on different immigrant groups, and bringing their own perspectives to the classroom. Regardless of how we individualize this course, it is important that its content reflects the true diversity of immigrant families in the United States and prepares family science graduates for work with immigrant families in a globalized world.

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