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Cultivating Contact: A Guide to Building Bridges and Meaningful Connections Between Groups

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Editor's note: We wish to thank the American Immigration Council for making this Guide available as an open access document. The Guide is an excellent application of decades of research on the Contact Hypothesis/Intergroup Contact Theory. The link to the full document can be found beneath the Introduction below.

**Cultivating Contact:
A Guide to Building Bridges and Meaningful Connections Between Groups**

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In this guide, we describe how to set the stage for people from different backgrounds to engage with each other in ways that foster trust and belonging, while also drawing on their similarities and differences to solve community problems. We review a number of strategies that encourage people from different groups to work together as equals, so that they can share ideas and perspectives, and co-create new initiatives in collaboration and across group divides. We also provide materials that can help organizations begin to envision how they might assess the effectiveness of their contact programs.

Keywords: Bridge-building, intergroup relations, contact hypothesis, contact programming

Introduction

The United States is in the process of reckoning with many forms of social division, but it is also facing a moment of immense possibility. With deepening divides occurring and being fomented across racial, religious, socioeconomic, partisan, and geographic lines, trust in others has declined and members of distinct groups are more isolated from each other than ever. Many forces seek to exploit these vulnerabilities and stoke fear and anxiety about group differences. Yet our nation's history shows us that, even in the midst of these challenges, Americans from all walks of life have found ways to come together across lines of difference to solve critical community problems.

How we choose to respond to group differences is ultimately up to us. We can take steps either to build walls or build bridges in the face of these differences. When we feel insecure, unsafe, or threatened, our initial instinct is to build walls, in an effort to protect ourselves and our groups. This instinctual response can help us to feel more secure and protected in the short term; but one long-term consequence is that we may grow more distrustful and fearful of people who are not like "us" and whom we don't personally know. Worse still, challenging social and economic conditions can exacerbate these tendencies, such that we start to develop competitive narratives that pit "us" against "them" and further deepen existing divisions between groups.

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Instead, when we build bridges, we take steps to engage with people across lines of difference. Engaging with one another in meaningful and authentic ways often requires us to step outside of our comfort zone, as we begin to share our life stories and experiences openly while attending deeply and respectfully to those shared by others. From interacting with others with this spirit of openness and attentiveness, we invite others into our worlds, just as they invite us into theirs. By doing so, we not only develop greater mutual understanding, but we are also likely to become more invested in each other's lives and to care more about each other's groups—and this emotional investment and caring is what compels us to work toward improving our communities and social institutions to ensure that everyone feels like they belong.

In this guide, we describe how to set the stage for people from different backgrounds to engage with each other in ways that foster trust and belonging, while also drawing on their similarities and differences to solve community problems. We review a number of strategies that encourage people from different groups to work together as equals, so that they can share ideas and perspectives, and co-create new initiatives in collaboration and across group divides. We also provide materials that can help organizations begin to envision how they might assess the effectiveness of their contact programs.

Cultivating Contact was produced in partnership with Welcoming America and the Intergroup Relations and Social Justice Lab at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/cultivating-contact?emci=28972d69-953e-ed11-a27c-281878b83d8a&emdi=1385770c-aa3e-ed11-a27c-281878b83d8a&ceid=10436660>

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