

## CLOSING THOUGHTS: NOT JUST DIVERSITY, BUT EQUITY AND INCLUSION

By Elena Stone, Program Development Specialist, Collaborative of Asian American, Native American, Latino, and African American Institutes, UMass Boston

**M**ore than two decades ago, the Boston Foundation and UMass Boston joined forces to document the changing realities of Boston's population in their report *A Dream Deferred: Changing Demographics, Challenges & New Opportunities for Boston*. While noting that “harsh, troubling and prolonged realities” of inequality stubbornly persisted for Boston's communities of color, *A Dream Deferred* concluded with a call:

to build a new community in Boston that learns from the past while harnessing the current forces of change. This new Boston would recognize that racial and ethnic diversity creates opportunities, rather than burdens, for all of the city's residents (*Watanabe et al., 1996*).

Our current report shows that, in many ways, this call is still an aspirational one, and one that must be heard region-wide, not just in Boston proper. Not only do adversities remain, but some have been exacerbated by a considerably more polarized political and economic climate on the national level. Even locally, challenges related to polarization highlight the need to go beyond merely tolerating differences, indeed to celebrate our region's racial diversity and to take action to make equity and inclusion on every level a reality.

This report attempts to capture some of these complexities. As we consider the three themes that our essays address, a picture unfolds not only of the challenges that come with changing regional demographics, but of the accompanying opportunities to consider new models and approaches for making Greater Boston a welcoming and thriving hub for everyone who calls it home.

### RESIDENTIAL PATTERNS AND HOUSING ISSUES

The growing scarcity of affordable housing is an important catalyst for the latest demographic shifts within Greater Boston. While much of the growing diversity in outlying cities and towns may be due to immigration from abroad, there is ample evidence that the limited availability of affordable housing in the urban core is also pushing all kinds of families away from neighborhoods where they otherwise may prefer to live. Among them are many who settled in Boston as migrants fleeing poverty, violence or repression who may once again feel pressure—this time from tightening economic screws—to leave a community they call home. It is important to think about how best to support the families making tough choices in order to stay afloat financially, the neighborhoods struggling to ensure that new development benefits existing communities, and the municipalities called to embrace increasing diversity as new populations arrive.

The experience of the Native American community of Aquinnah highlights a striking variation on this theme—displaced residents returning home when federal recognition for the Aquinnah Wampanoag tribe made it possible to offer affordable housing to low-income tribal members. Rather than seeing the Aquinnah story as an outlier, we might consider it as a model of the power of affordable housing to stabilize and enhance a community.

## INCOME STRATIFICATION, POLARIZATION AND INEQUALITY

While our report documents severe income disparities correlated with race and ethnicity throughout Boston and the region, it is interesting to note how the level of economic inequality varies among neighborhoods, cities and towns. Particularly striking is the story of Malden, where less substantial income inequality seems to coincide with a greater sense of inclusion and the ability to incorporate diverse groups into the social fabric. It is worth further exploring the relationship between these two factors in order to better understand how to promote both economic equity and social inclusion as communities become more diverse. Equally important to note are income variations within broad populations, reminding us how new immigrant subgroups can change the face of racial and ethnic communities over time, challenging expectations and bringing with them diverse experiences and needs.

These essays point to the question of how we can build on already proven pathways to economic success, such as immigrant entrepreneurship, to create new possibilities for economic growth for communities of color, while at the same time increasing access to opportunities in the tech sector and other areas of regional economic growth. For this, education is key. While this report did not identify education as one of its major themes, each community studied has pointed to educational disparities as a critical factor to overcome in order to achieve greater economic equity. Our region needs the perspectives, skills and wisdom of all its residents to create a future of growing and inclusive prosperity. As we educate and train an up-and-coming generation to take its place in a 21st century economy, we must help students of all backgrounds to become not just workers but leaders, who use their knowledge, creativity and voices to move all of us forward.

## POLITICAL, BUSINESS AND CIVIC REPRESENTATION

Since the *A Dream Deferred* report, Boston proper has seen a significant leap in political representation, with its elected officials better reflecting the racial and ethnic diversity of the city. In line with national trends, this shift has largely been driven by women of color. As of this writing, women of color now hold six out of 13 seats on the Boston City Council, including the Council presidency. The Massachusetts 7th District Congressional seat, which includes about three quarters of Boston as well as surrounding cities and towns, is now held by an African American woman, the first woman of color to serve in the state's delegation. Other cities and towns discussed in this report have experienced varying levels of progress when it comes to diversifying their political landscapes, with Quincy standing out as a city whose Asian American population has increased electoral participation and increased political representation at both local and state levels.

Both business and civic representation provide pathways to political leadership for immigrants and people of color, as well as being in and of themselves important avenues for improving communities and neighborhoods. In this report, we see, for example, the powerful role that Cape Verdean and Haitian businesses owners play in recycling dollars into black communities, and the transformative effect of Vietnamese and Colombian-owned businesses on Fields Corner and East Boston, respectively. A question worth raising is whether such business know-how and related cultural capital can be shared across ethnic and racial lines, as a way of building majority-minority economic representation while developing leadership on a cross-cultural basis.

In the nonprofit arena, we see how civic and community-based organizations—from Casa Guatemala in Waltham to VietAID in Fields Corner, from Roxbury’s Nubian Square Coalition to the North American Indian Center of Boston in Jamaica Plain—make it possible for populations of color to advocate for themselves, serve the needs of vulnerable members, and engage with the larger community. This is particularly important because often, as we see in a number of neighborhoods and towns cited in this report, community-based organizations are ahead of the political arena when it comes to representing underserved groups that are relatively new to a given area. But many of these groups are sorely under-resourced, relying on volunteer labor and donations, and even those that are more established operate on a shoestring in a difficult funding environment. It is critical that the funding and government sectors recognize the key role that such groups play in addressing unmet needs and leveling the playing field as populations become increasingly diverse. These organizations, including those emerging in diversifying areas outside of Boston proper, need robust and consistent support. Finally, we must consider how best to leverage the entrepreneurial and nonprofit sectors as incubators for civic and political leadership, creating more pathways for residents of color to move into elected and appointed positions that give their communities a voice in policy making.

Finally, our hope is that the end of this report is the beginning of many conversations within and across Greater Boston. There is much work to be done, and we hope that the stories told here help to spark dialogue, suggest opportunities and motivate those who care deeply about our evolving diversity to work together toward a future of full equity and inclusion and a dream no longer deferred.