

For local governments, adopting more inclusionary practices is about preparation and action.

Why do some cities make intentional efforts to become more inclusive of their diverse populations while others do not? Using the food metaphor of a “roux”, [Jonathan M. Fisk](#), [Geoffrey A. Silvera](#), [John C. Morris](#), [Xi Chen](#), [Xiaofeng Chen](#), [Mac-Jane Crayton](#) and [Jan Hume](#) write that without careful consideration by local governments, diverse constituencies may not be able to participate in the communities in which they live. They find that local governments – especially those with a professional city or county manager – are more willing to offer inclusion initiatives such as cultural competency training for their employees when more of their residents are foreign born.

As administration scholars, we are rarely able to weave food metaphors into our work. But they can be useful in helping us explain our new research on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in US local governments, as they encapsulate many of the associated principles and actions. Much of the literature around DEI uses food metaphors, and so, in trying to appreciate the contributions of our findings, there was a need to understand what “sets the table” for DEI initiatives in local governments. Local governments have been thrust into the limelight on issues of diversity management, so it is timely to look at how local governments address inclusion.

Using food metaphors to understand diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in local government

In our work, we use the metaphor of a roux, a mixture of flour and fat which requires close monitoring and managing, and serves as the foundation for gumbo, one of Louisiana’s celebrated dishes that combines culinary aspects of African, French, Spanish, German, and the Choctaw (First Nation Tribe) cultures. We believe that the roux metaphor is helpful for understanding diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in local governments. Local governments often already represent diverse constituencies – whether it is via their citizens’ race and ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, experiences, learning styles, age, or other characteristics that make an appreciable difference. In other words, there are already many ingredients. Yet, without careful and deliberate inclusion, the flavors of those ingredients may not be able to contribute. For cities, the challenge is similar and requires careful and deliberate actions that push the community towards greater degrees of inclusion and equity. With these careful and deliberate steps, local governments are better positioned to maximize the collective skills, passions, and abilities of all their citizens.

We set out in this project to understand what factors are associated with local governments that go beyond counting and beyond legal compliance; why do some cities make intentional efforts to become more inclusive while others do not? Understanding these factors within US local governments is particularly important as local governments are involved in an array of services that affect citizens’ lives such as law enforcement and public safety, parks, recreation, planning and zoning, and community and economic development. Yet, the distribution of services, the points of contact with citizens, and the impacts on diverse groups are not necessarily spread in an equitable manner. By being inclusive and seeking to (re)build partnerships, to collect data, to learn, to reflect, and to change practices, more and diverse citizens are likely seated at the ‘table’ and may meaningfully contribute to the ‘gumbo making.’ The stakes could not be higher. For many, they involve life and death decisions. For many others, they strike at the core of local democracy and who governs.

We examined three inclusive initiatives that have the potential to assist a community as it seeks to become more inclusive i.e., in becoming the roux: offering cultural competency training, providing access to multi-lingual community information, and including a preference for multi-lingual job applicant. To do so, we analyzed data from the [International City/County Management Association \(ICMA\)’s 2018 Local Government & Immigrant Communities Survey](#) and community demographic variables from the [American Community Survey](#) (ACS) from 1,201 local governments.

Authorities with more foreign-born residents are more likely to offer cultural competency training to their employees

In general, the results suggest that local governments are more willing to engage in inclusion initiatives as a response to the needs of their citizens and residents. Data shows that as the number of residents who were born elsewhere (i.e., foreign-born) increase the odds of the local government offering cultural competency training to its employees increases. We surmised that as the number of foreign-born individuals within the jurisdiction increases, their presence and associated needs may reveal deficiencies in the current skillsets of local government employees or gaps in services. As a response, local officials may turn to cultural competency training with a particular emphasis on incorporating new knowledge into more inclusive service delivery and engagement. Local needs were also associated with the adoption of both language service variables.



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We suggest that within these communities, language-specific needs are likely to be greater. As a result, multi-lingual skills are a key tool in ensuring that various groups have a seat in city hall or in the county commission chamber and that they can be an important part of the conversation. Our data also suggest that the form of government and whether there is a professional city or county manager in the local government matter. We infer that the professional training of city and county managers makes a difference, as compared to those with less expertise in local government. While we could not pinpoint a reason, managers may place a greater value or significance on multi-lingual skills and abilities in meeting the aims of the local government administration.

Preparation and action are important

In every local government administration, diversity (the “ingredients”) is present, but inclusion does not just happen, and cities cannot continue to believe that they will be able to react their way into being inclusive. To continue the cooking metaphor, our finding that of the importance of the relationship between city and county managers and inclusion initiatives shows that preparation is key. Both the ingredients and “the cook” are important drivers of inclusion. Like a roux, inclusion requires intentional oversight by one who is willing to ‘read the recipe card’ and act.

Our finding that the presence of foreign-born populations increases the likelihood of engaging in inclusion initiatives seems to affirm that some ingredients matter differently than others in their likelihood to stimulate local inclusionary efforts – just like some ingredients are more motivating than others when preparing a meal. Yet still, we affirm that inclusion efforts are warranted even when local government administrators do not see the need for it, as diversity, in some form, is always present. Populations, by their nature, are diverse, and while many of the conversations in the diversity, equity, and inclusion space are wrapped around racial diversity, populations are also often diverse in ways that cannot be perceived, including ethnic diversity, LGBTQ, mental health needs, literacy, etc. Thus, the time for local governments to begin engaging in inclusion efforts is always right now.

- *This article is based on the paper, [‘Toward the Roux: Explaining the Adoption of Inclusionary Practices in Local Governments’](#) in *State and Local Government Review*.*

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