

Nebraska: If Not Immigrants, Who?

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Introduction

The lecture “Nebraska: If Not Immigrants, Who?” uses the theme “Think Global, Act Local” to show that migration has shaped Nebraska’s settlement, economy, communities, and future. The original summary correctly identifies labor demand, European settlement, Mexican migration, agriculture, meatpacking, racialization, and changing immigration rules as major themes. Several statements require correction. Indigenous nations lived in the region long before Nebraska became a U.S. territory or state; they did not merely “inherit” the territory in 1858. Nineteenth-century naturalization was not equally simple because federal law restricted citizenship by race and excluded many people. During the Great Depression, Mexican repatriation campaigns removed hundreds of thousands of people from the United States, including U.S. citizens, through coercion and discrimination—not mainly because of criminal conduct. Updated Census estimates show that foreign-born residents constituted about 8 percent of Nebraska’s population during 2020–2024, with much higher shares in several agricultural and meatpacking counties. A stronger lecture response connects this history with labor, belonging, policy, and local responsibility (University of Nebraska, 2017).

The Meaning of “Think Global, Act Local”

Global forces shape local life through commodity markets, war, climate, labor recruitment, family networks, trade, and federal immigration policy. Nebraska’s farms and food-processing plants sell into national and international markets, while employers recruit workers from communities connected across borders. Refugees arrive because of conflicts occurring thousands of miles away but rebuild lives in Omaha, Lincoln, Grand Island, and smaller towns. “Act local” means that schools, clinics, employers, governments, faith communities, and neighbors decide whether migration produces exploitation and exclusion or belonging and shared prosperity. Local action cannot change every federal rule, but it strongly affects housing, language access, safety, education, and social participation.

Indigenous Nebraska Before Settler Migration

Any immigration history must begin by distinguishing voluntary or state-sponsored settlement from Indigenous presence and dispossession. The region now called Nebraska is the homeland of nations including the Omaha, Ponca, Pawnee, Otoe-Missouria, Lakota, and others. U.S. expansion, treaties, warfare, land cessions, reservation policy, and forced removal transformed their territories. Describing Nebraska only as a state “founded on migration” can hide the unequal power through

which settler land became available. A responsible account recognizes Indigenous sovereignty and continued communities rather than treating Native peoples as one early immigrant group. Migration made modern Nebraska, but it occurred on land with prior political and cultural histories (Nebraska State Historical Society, 2025).

Territorial Settlement and European Immigration

Nebraska Territory was organized in 1854, and Nebraska became a state in 1867. Railroads, federal land policy, advertising, and agricultural opportunity attracted settlers from the eastern United States and Europe. Germans, Czechs, Scandinavians, Irish people, and other groups established farms, towns, newspapers, churches, businesses, and voluntary associations. Immigrants did not arrive only as agricultural laborers. They included craftspeople, merchants, professionals, religious leaders, and families seeking land or political opportunity. Their integration was shaped by language, religion, class, war, and changing definitions of whiteness. Groups later remembered as ordinary European Americans often encountered prejudice before becoming incorporated into a broader white identity.

Czech Settlement

Czech immigrants became especially important in Nebraska's agricultural and urban development. Many established farms, while others worked as tradespeople, business owners, journalists, and professionals. Czech-language institutions preserved culture and helped newcomers navigate society. Settlement was supported by chain migration: relatives and neighbors shared information, transport, employment, and housing. This pattern shows that migration is rarely an isolated individual decision. Networks reduce risk and help communities reproduce language and social life. Over generations, Czech Nebraskans contributed to a regional identity while experiencing gradual assimilation and intermarriage. Their history complicates the claim that present newcomers alone form separate enclaves; earlier immigrants also created strong ethnic communities.

Citizenship Was Never Equally Simple

The original summary suggests that nineteenth-century immigrants merely paid a court fee, waited, and received citizenship. Some European immigrants did face fewer administrative barriers than many applicants today, but federal naturalization law was racially restricted. The 1790 law limited naturalization to "free white persons," and later law extended eligibility to people of African nativity or descent while Asian immigrants remained excluded through changing statutes and court decisions. Women's citizenship could also depend on marital status. Indigenous people were governed through a separate and coercive legal history. Ease for one eligible European man should not be generalized into an open system for everyone. Race was built into citizenship law rather than appearing suddenly in the twentieth century.

Railroads and Industrial Labor

Railroad construction connected Nebraska's communities with national markets and required mobile labor. Railroads also promoted settlement, transported livestock and grain, and helped create towns. Workers came from several ethnic and national backgrounds and often faced dangerous conditions, low pay, and employer control. The infrastructure that appears permanent on the landscape was produced through human movement and labor. Similar patterns later appeared in construction, agriculture, food processing, and services: employers sought workers, but public institutions often failed to provide equivalent housing, safety, or political inclusion.

Agriculture and Seasonal Work

Agriculture depends on land, capital, technology, family labor, hired workers, and international markets. Migrants have worked in sugar beets, livestock, crops, dairies, and related industries. Mechanization reduces some labor needs while creating specialized jobs and concentrating production. Farm work can involve long hours, weather exposure, chemicals, injury, and unstable schedules. Immigration discussions often celebrate workers' economic contribution without asking whether wages, housing, transport, and legal protections are adequate. Welcoming workers requires more than filling vacancies. It means treating them as residents whose children attend school and whose health and safety affect the whole community.

Mexican Migration and Sugar Beets

Mexican and Mexican American workers were recruited into agriculture, railroads, and sugar-beet production in the early twentieth century. Employers valued the labor while communities and government institutions frequently subjected workers to segregation and discrimination. Calling sugar-beet work a "Mexican industry" can obscure who owned the land and processing companies and who captured profit. Workers developed families, neighborhoods, cultural institutions, and labor strategies rather than functioning only as a temporary workforce. Migration increased and decreased with labor demand, border enforcement, economic crisis, and U.S. policy.

Mexican Repatriation During the Great Depression

During the 1930s, federal, state, and local authorities, employers, and relief agencies participated in campaigns that pressured or removed people of Mexican ancestry. Many were blamed for unemployment and public costs during the Depression. U.S. citizens were among those forced or induced to leave. These actions were not a targeted response to widespread immigrant criminality. They were driven by economic scapegoating, racism, and weak due process. Correcting this history matters because public narratives that connect immigration with crime can make exclusion appear

administratively neutral. Nebraska's history should be placed within this broader national episode (Balderrama & Rodríguez, 2006).

Meatpacking Restructuring

Late twentieth-century meatpacking changed as firms moved facilities from large unionized urban centers toward rural areas closer to livestock. Companies adopted new production systems, lowered labor costs, and recruited a workforce that increasingly included Latino immigrants, refugees, and other newcomers. This brought jobs and population growth to some towns but also created demanding work involving speed, injury risk, cold environments, and repetitive motion. Communities had to expand schools, housing, healthcare, interpretation, and transportation. The industry's success depends on immigrant labor, but that dependence should strengthen the case for worker protection rather than justify vulnerability (Gouveia & Stull, 1995).

Refugee Resettlement

Nebraska has also received refugees from Vietnam, Bosnia, Sudan, Somalia, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and other countries. Refugees are admitted through a humanitarian and legal process distinct from ordinary labor migration and asylum procedures. Many arrive after displacement, violence, or long periods in camps. Resettlement agencies and local institutions assist with initial housing, employment, health screening, and education, but long-term integration extends beyond the first months. Refugees contribute languages, businesses, faith institutions, skills, and global relationships. They may also face trauma, credential barriers, discrimination, and separation from family.

Current Population Patterns

U.S. Census Bureau estimates for 2020–2024 indicate that approximately 8 percent of Nebraska residents were foreign born. The statewide percentage hides local concentration. Hall and Saline counties had foreign-born shares around 17 percent, reflecting food processing, agriculture, and established migration networks. Omaha and Lincoln contain diverse communities, but small cities and rural towns can experience proportionally larger change. Local institutions need detailed data on language, age, occupation, school enrollment, and housing rather than one statewide average. A community with a modest absolute number of newcomers may still need substantial capacity when services were designed for a different population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026).

Labor-Force Participation

Foreign-born Nebraskans have high labor-force participation and contribute in manufacturing, agriculture, construction, healthcare, hospitality, education, entrepreneurship, and other sectors. Economic contribution should not be the sole basis for human worth, but it corrects the claim that immigrants are primarily burdens. Workers pay taxes, purchase goods, rent or own homes, and support local population stability. Some employers use immigration status or language barriers to suppress complaints. Effective economic integration therefore requires wage enforcement, occupational safety, recognition of credentials, and pathways to advancement.

Schools

Schools are among the first institutions to experience demographic change. English learners need qualified instruction, but bilingualism is an asset rather than a defect. Families require interpreters for important meetings and should not be expected to rely on children. Schools can support newcomers through welcome centers, trauma-sensitive practice, family liaisons, and recognition of prior learning. Integration should not mean erasing home language or culture. When schools are adequately funded, immigrant enrollment can strengthen local communities by stabilizing attendance and expanding cultural knowledge. When resources are inadequate, frustration may be misdirected toward students rather than policy.

Healthcare and Public Health

Immigrants may face barriers involving insurance, transport, language, work schedules, rural provider shortages, and fear about information sharing. Qualified interpretation is essential for consent, diagnosis, and medication safety. Employers and communities also benefit when workers can obtain preventive care and recover without losing housing. Public-health systems should communicate clearly across languages and distinguish healthcare from immigration enforcement where law permits. Newcomers are not inherently sources of disease; health risk is shaped by work, housing, access, vaccination, and exposure like it is for other residents.

Housing

Rapid labor recruitment can outpace local housing supply. Workers may live in overcrowded or substandard units because affordable options are scarce. This can create tension over rent and neighborhood change. Blaming newcomers does not solve an inadequate supply created by planning, wages, and investment. Local governments and employers should coordinate housing development, inspection, transport, and tenant rights before expanding recruitment. Employer-controlled housing requires safeguards because loss of a job should not instantly remove shelter and because workers

need a safe way to report conditions.

Belonging and Civic Participation

Integration involves more than employment. Residents need opportunities to participate in schools, neighborhood associations, libraries, religious communities, local boards, arts, sports, and public discussion. Noncitizens may have limited formal voting rights, but they remain affected by municipal decisions. Citizenship assistance, legal information, leadership programs, and translated public communication can strengthen participation. Longtime residents also need accurate opportunities to discuss change without being encouraged toward fear. Shared projects help transform abstract categories into relationships.

Immigration Status and Language

The phrase “legal or illegal people” reduces human beings to a status and hides the complexity of immigration law. A person may be a citizen, lawful permanent resident, refugee, asylee, temporary worker, student, recipient of another protected status, applicant with a pending case, or undocumented. Status can change and family members may hold different categories. Policy disagreements are legitimate, but language should distinguish conduct and legal position from identity. Local service providers should understand eligibility rules and avoid making legal judgments beyond their expertise.

Challenges of Exploitation and Exclusion

Immigrants may encounter wage theft, unsafe work, discrimination, recruitment debt, document abuse, or threats based on status. These harms distort competition because employers who violate law undercut responsible businesses. Enforcement of wage, safety, and anti-trafficking rules protects all workers. Community safety also improves when victims and witnesses can report crime without disproportionate fear that seeking help will separate a family. Immigration enforcement and local policing involve contested legal choices, but public institutions should avoid policies that make serious exploitation invisible.

Local Policy Recommendations

Nebraska communities can act locally by funding language access, schools, healthcare navigation, affordable housing, worker safety, legal services, and welcoming programs. Employers should recruit responsibly, disclose conditions, provide training, and support advancement. Universities can recognize foreign credentials and connect research with community needs. Local leaders should include immigrant and Indigenous voices in decisions rather than discussing communities only as

labor supply. Data should track outcomes without creating surveillance. Finally, state and federal leaders need immigration pathways aligned with economic reality, family unity, humanitarian obligations, and due process.

Personal Reflection on the Lecture

The lecture's strongest lesson is that Nebraska has repeatedly depended on newcomers while changing the boundaries of who is accepted as American. European groups once viewed with suspicion became central to the state's identity. Mexican workers and refugees now contribute under different legal and racial conditions. This history does not prove that every immigration policy should be unrestricted. It shows that policy should be judged honestly through labor needs, rights, capacity, and long-term community building. Welcoming people is not only allowing entry. It is creating institutions in which residents can work safely, educate children, receive care, and participate with dignity.

Conclusion

"Nebraska: If Not Immigrants, Who?" presents migration as a continuing force in state development. A complete account begins with Indigenous nations and the dispossession that preceded settler migration. It then recognizes European settlement, Mexican agricultural labor, railroad construction, meatpacking restructuring, refugee resettlement, and contemporary professional and entrepreneurial migration. Citizenship was never equally simple, and Depression-era Mexican repatriation was driven by racialized exclusion rather than general criminality. Today, about 8 percent of Nebraskans are foreign born, with much higher shares in several local counties. Immigrants help sustain industries and communities, but contribution does not remove the need for fair wages, housing, healthcare, education, and belonging. Thinking globally and acting locally means preparing institutions for the people the economy and humanitarian system already bring together.

References

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