

WELCOMING WEEK

THE POWER OF NARRATIVES

Language, Evidence, and the Law

The immigration process involves laws, forms, fingerprints and documents, but also centers on people's stories. Who gets to speak, what questions are asked, and what details are written down can shape the outcome.

MYTHS, FACTS & CONTEXT

Assumptions can leave out important legal and personal context.

Myth

"Alien" tells us a person's exact immigration status

Fact

Federal law uses "alien" broadly for anyone who is not a U.S. citizen or national

Why It Matters

One label can hide important differences in a person's situation

Myth

The F-1 visa interview is only about school paperwork

Fact

A student may have only a brief interview to explain why they chose a program, how they will pay, and what they plan to do afterward. The review may also include the student's online presence.

Why It Matters

In a few minutes, a student must turn paperwork into a clear story about an important life decision.

OVER REFRESHMENTS

How does the language used in immigration discussions affect whose stories are heard, understood, or believed?

1

WHO GETS TO TELL THEIR STORY?

Beginning July 28, 2026, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services may send some asylum cases to immigration court after reviewing the written file and other available information, without first interviewing the person.

NARRATIVE CONNECTION

Without an interview, the written application may be a person's main opportunity at this stage to explain what happened. The details included, or left out, can shape how a story is first understood.

2

WHEN A STORY MOVES BETWEEN LANGUAGES

Immigration forms and court filings are generally submitted in English. Documents written in another language may also require a certified English translation.

NARRATIVE CONNECTION

An interview can be an important chance to make sure the written record accurately reflects a person's story. The interpreter should communicate every question and answer accurately and completely, without adding, leaving out, or changing its meaning. Even a small error can affect how a person's story is understood.

3

WHEN A STORY BECOMES EVIDENCE

Some people facing deportation can ask an immigration judge to let them stay through a process called cancellation of removal. The judge must consider several things, including how the person's removal would affect certain close family members who are U.S. citizens or green card holders.

NARRATIVE CONNECTION

A person's story can explain what documents cannot show, such as who they care for, a family member's health needs, and how the family depends on them. Medical records, school records, and letters can help support that story.

REFERENCES

- 8 U.S.C. § 1101: Definitions
- U.S. Dep't of State, Student Visa
- *Affirmative Asylum Referrals Without Interview*, 91 Fed. Reg. 47101 (July 28, 2026), corrected at 91 Fed. Reg. 55735 (Aug. 31, 2026)
- 8 C.F.R. § 1003.33
- DOJ, EOIR Policy Manual Pt. II § 2.3(a)
- 8 U.S.C. § 1229b(b)(1)

WELCOMING WEEK

The Power of Narratives

Stories. Language. Belonging.

Personal stories can deepen our understanding of how immigration intersects with family, identity, and belonging while challenging stereotypes about immigrant experiences.

MEET THE SPEAKERS



Masume Assaf

Former Assistant Vice Provost
International Student and Scholar
Advising
Penn State

A second-generation Iranian American who spent 42 years supporting international students and scholars at Penn State.



Chiluvya Zulu

Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion,
and Belonging
State College Borough

Leads Borough efforts to build a welcoming community, improve access to public services, and strengthen relationships with residents.



Chong Liu

Clinical Student
Center for Immigrants' Rights Clinic
Penn State Dickinson Law

An international student from China and a second-year student at Penn State Dickinson Law.

AS YOU LISTEN

How have the speakers' experiences shaped their understanding of immigration, family, public service, and belonging?

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