

BOSTON REPORT

Steps To Success:

INTEGRATING IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS



WORLD EDUCATION SERVICES



Immigrant Professional Integration

About the Study

The findings in this report are based on a first-of-its-kind study about the economic success of college-educated immigrants in the United States.

Data was collected and analyzed from over 4,000 college-educated immigrant respondents through an online survey, and more than 5,500 immigrants of all educational levels via an audio survey.

The objective of the study was to increase the amount of publicly-available data on immigrant professionals which in its scarcity, has currently left gaps in understanding the specific barriers and opportunities that contribute to immigrant economic success. Our goal is to inform policymakers, funders, and community organizations on how to better serve, integrate, and support college-educated immigrants.

The study was conducted by World Education Services (WES) through its Global Talent Bridge program, the IMPRINT coalition, and the Institute for Immigration Research (IIR) at George Mason University. It was co-authored by Amanda Bergson-Shilcock & James Witte, Ph.D., with editorial assistance from Sylvia Rusin. Funding for the study was provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Read the full report at: imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess.

For further information about this study or other IMPRINT initiatives email us at contact@imprintproject.org.

Acknowledgements

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Graphic design by Jouna Saza and Alisa Krutovsky, World Education Services.

INTRODUCTION

Boston is home to approximately 165,000 immigrants, which is 27% of Boston's total population.¹ In the past fifteen years, Boston's immigrant population has increased by 9%.¹ Following the same trend, the share of immigrant workers in the Massachusetts economy has almost doubled from 10.2% in 1990 to 17.9% in 2010.²

Nearly 30% of adult immigrants in the Boston region have a bachelor's degree or higher.² By 2018, over half (53%) of future job openings in the Boston region will require an associate's degree or higher.³ The majority of these new jobs are expected to include the Health Care and Social Assistance and Educational Services industries, the leading industries currently employing immigrants in Boston.¹

Various research studies have discussed the increased role immigrants are likely to take in the labor force as the Baby Boom generation moves towards retirement.³ Immigrant professionals already working in fields where shortages are anticipated are well-positioned to fill projected labor gaps and make increasingly significant contributions to the broader economy as their talents are more fully utilized.

To better understand the differing employment trajectories of immigrant professionals in the United States, IMPRINT conducted a first-of-its-kind study analyzing the factors correlated with the economic success of college-educated* immigrants in six metropolitan areas across the U.S., including Boston. Read the full report at imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess.

IMPRINT's study revealed the vital role of social capital, English language skills, and workplace acculturation in fostering immigrant economic success. The study results also suggested the need for different approaches to serving immigrants with purely foreign higher education, versus those who obtained at least some higher education in the United States. The findings from Boston were consistent with the findings from other cities in the national study. This report highlights key factors which contribute to immigrant economic

success in Boston and the U.S. more broadly, as well as recommendations for action.



BRAIN WASTE

The underutilization of immigrant professionals' talent, which contributes to significant U.S. economic loss.

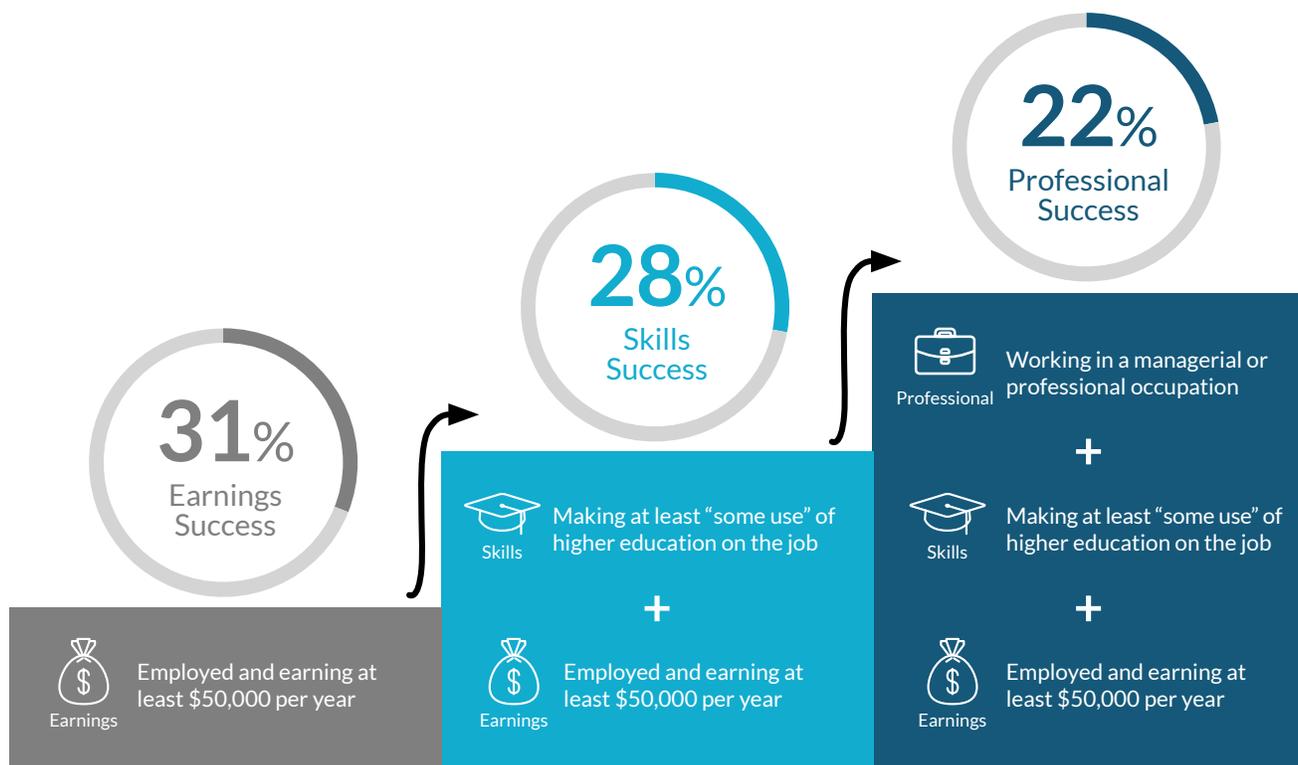
There are approximately **7.2 million college-educated immigrants in the U.S.** An estimated **52% of these immigrants obtained their degrees in a foreign country.** However, more than a quarter of these highly-skilled immigrants are either unemployed or working in jobs that do not make appropriate use of their knowledge and skills. This phenomenon, often termed "brain waste," represents a significant social and economic cost for both the individuals affected and for our society as a whole.

DEFINING SUCCESS

The study established three definitions of success and analyzed factors that correlated with the economic success and professional integration of college-educated immigrants. The definitions can be viewed as incremental levels of success, each one building upon the last.

The first definition, earnings success, refers to immigrants who were currently employed and making at least \$50,000 per year. The second and third definitions focused not only on employment status and income, but also on immigrants' ability to apply their education and training on the job. Skills success refers to immigrants who were employed, making at least \$50,000 and making at least "some use" of their higher education in their current job. Professional success refers to immigrants who were employed, making at least \$50,000, making at least "some use" of their higher education on the job, and employed in managerial or professional occupations.

* Refers to "college-educated" immigrants, meaning those who have received at least some higher education outside the U.S.



Success is measured incrementally based on the same data pool.

These three definitions of success were also analyzed at a lower income threshold of \$30,000.* Immigrants who met this lower requirement were categorized into emerging earnings, emerging skills, or emerging professional success.

an even smaller subset (30%) had achieved emerging professional success.

Defining success at the higher income threshold of \$50,000, 31% of all respondents had achieved earnings success, a subset (28%) had achieved skills success, and an even smaller subset (22%) had attained professional success.

Among the factors associated with college-educated immigrants' achievement, our study found that each level of success was strongly correlated with two factors in particular: social capital** (defined as currently having many friends and family in the U.S. to rely on for support) and English language skills (based on either speaking English as a primary language or speaking English "very well").

KEY FINDINGS

Nationwide Findings

This section presents key findings about the national sample. Across all survey respondents, approximately half (47%) had achieved the lower \$30,000 income threshold of emerging earnings success, while a subset of those (40%) had achieved emerging skills success and

* While the \$30,000 income level might seem modest, it slightly exceeds the United States median per capita income of \$28,000.

** Social capital is less a measurement of actual social resources exchanged between members of networks than a potential for access and ties among actors possessing more or less valuable social resources. It is this understanding that underlies the questions used in our survey to assess each individual's current social capital.

Table 1. Percentage of Respondents Attaining Success by Language and Social Capital

	\$30,000 INCOME THRESHOLD			\$50,000 INCOME THRESHOLD		
	EMERGING EARNINGS SUCCESS	EMERGING SKILLS SUCCESS	EMERGING PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS	EARNINGS SUCCESS	SKILLS SUCCESS	PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS
Overall Survey Respondents	47%	40%	30%	31%	28%	22%
Speak English as a Primary Language	55%	49%	39%	40%	37%	30%
Abundant Social Capital*	64%	56%	45%	44%	41%	34%
Speak English as a Primary Language and Abundant Social Capital*	70%	64%	51%	51%	50%	40%

*Abundant social capital refers to respondents who reported currently having many friends/family in the U.S. to rely on for support

As detailed in Table 1, strong English language skills were linked to virtually every possible measure of success in our study.

Supportive networks of friends and family were also correlated with survey respondents’ economic success.

Boston Findings

Our 436 Boston-area respondents achieved each of our study’s measures of success at similar rates to respondents in the other five cities. A majority of Boston-area respondents (53%) had achieved emerging earnings success, some of whom (23%) had achieved professional success.

Key factors strongly correlated with the measures of success were abundant social capital, strong English language skills, and length of time in the U.S.

Both nationally and in Boston, approximately one quarter of all respondents were likely to report having “many” friends and family currently to rely on for support.

Although Boston-area respondents reported speaking English as their primary language at almost the same

rate (26%) as all other respondents (25%), they were marginally less likely to speak English “very well” (61% in Boston, compared to 66% among all other respondents). This is significant because according to the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the vast majority of jobs in the Boston region’s labor market require at least medium-low language skill and there tends to be a clear connection between language skill requirements and salary.³

Credential Evaluation is the process of assessing academic qualifications obtained in one country and determining their equivalents in another country.

U.S. Professional Licensure is granted through a state licensing board and often involves training and exams, but the process varies by profession and by state. For foreign-educated immigrants, credential evaluation is required to apply for licensure.

Furthermore, in Massachusetts, high skilled workers who are reported to have limited English proficiency (LEP) and foreign degrees have the highest unemployment rate, currently at 8.8%.²

Table 2. How Boston-area Respondents Compare to All Other Respondents

KEY SUCCESS CRITERIA	BOSTON RESPONDENTS	ALL OTHER RESPONDENTS
Speak English as Primary Language	26%	25%
Speak English "Very Well"	61%	66%
Pursued Additional Higher Education in the U.S.*	61%	56%
Applied for Credential Evaluation	62%	59%
Applied for U.S. Licensure**	37%	28%
Have Lived in the U.S. Six Years or More	65%	63%
Have "Many" Friends and Family Currently in the U.S. to Rely on for Support	26%	25%
Feel Like Current Training/Education is "Good Enough" to Meet Career Goals	43%	48%
Registered to Vote	39%	39%

** p < .01, * p < .05, no asterisk denotes lack of statistical significance

^"All Other Respondents" includes respondents in the survey's other five cities as well as those who chose "other" as the place they currently lived.

The majority of Boston-area respondents (65%) have lived in the U.S. for six years or more, and our study found that living in the U.S. for at least six years is strongly correlated with higher incomes, lower rates of unemployment, higher rates of volunteering, and better English language skills, as immigrants adapt culturally, linguistically, and socially to their new environment.

Boston-area respondents were slightly more likely to have pursued additional higher education in the United States (61% in Boston compared to 56% in all other areas). Boston respondents' higher rates of participation in U.S. higher education may have been influenced

by geographic locality, as the Boston region includes numerous well-known educational institutions. Both nationally and in Boston, survey respondents who reported having invested in additional U.S. education were more likely to be employed and successful than those who only received education abroad. Furthermore, according to the Migration Policy Institute, "immigrants" with U.S. college degrees are three times more likely to work in high-skilled jobs than those with an international degree.⁴

Boston-area respondents were also somewhat more likely to have applied for credential evaluation (62%)

Table 3. Success Among Boston-area Respondents . **



* Here "immigrants" refers to legal permanent residents.

** Differences in Table 3 are not statistically significant. The low sample size (436 respondents) could have limited the statistical significance of our findings, causing the p values to be conservative. For this reason, conservative p values increase the likelihood of not detecting statistical significance even if differences do exist.

compared to all other respondents (59%). Perhaps most notably, Boston-area respondents were more likely to have applied for U.S. professional licensure (37%) compared to all other respondents (28%). In other words, they were 1.3 times more likely to have applied for U.S. professional licensure than all other respondents. Since there is limited data on differences in U.S. licensing procedures across states, it is unclear what may be causing this finding. Additional research could explore geographic differences in licensure processes.

Interestingly, despite Boston respondents' relatively higher rate of licensure applications, they were somewhat less likely to feel like their current education was "good enough" to meet their career goals (43% in Boston and 48% among all other respondents). Boston-area respondents were more likely to say that they are currently enrolled in training or plan to be (28% compared to 24% of overall respondents).

When asked about barriers in finding employment, Boston-area respondents were more likely to report "personal or financial constraints" (28%, compared to 18% overall). It is difficult to assess what may be driving respondents' relatively greater experiences of personal and financial barriers. Factors at work may be specific to Boston, such as facing a higher cost of living and/or higher costs for childcare. These differences could be an artifact of demographic differences in our sample.

The level of civic engagement among Boston-area respondents was comparable to all other respondents. Boston-area respondents were registered to vote at exactly the same rate (39%) as all other respondents.

Drawing upon the findings described above, as well as others explored in our full report, we have developed a series of recommendations for future action.

MOVING FORWARD

Our findings provide crucial data to inform recommendations for service providers, funders, and policymakers who are seeking to tap the talents of underutilized skilled immigrants.

Recommendations for Policymakers:

After a decade of budget cuts, we urge the restoration of funding to existing public workforce and adult education programs, whose participants include

immigrant professionals, and that public agencies better utilize data from existing resources to improve services and information about this population. Finally, we encourage public agencies to look within government to identify potential opportunities for immigrant professionals

to acquire valuable American work experience. In particular, we recommend that policymakers:

1. Fully fund existing public programs in adult education, training, and employment. At the federal level, such programs have suffered significant cuts over the past decade, and immigrant participation has likewise declined. Funding programs at their fully authorized levels can help to restore the capacity lost to the system, and ensure that eligible immigrant professionals get what they need to succeed.
2. Improve data collection on immigrant professionals. Identify opportunities in existing federal programs to collect data on nativity, English language proficiency, and foreign education or credentials, or analyze existing datasets for such information. In order to develop appropriate responses to constituent and community needs, policymakers need high-quality data illustrating the capacity of public programs to serve immigrant professionals.

English language skills and supportive social networks play important roles in fostering economic success for college-educated immigrants.

3. Use existing infrastructure to improve the quality of service provision. For example, professional development activities for adult educators and refugee resettlement workers are both provided with federal funds. Policymakers should encourage the use of these existing pathways to improve the knowledge and ability of program staff to serve immigrant professionals.
4. Utilize existing processes to disseminate information to immigrant professionals. Websites and resources such as WelcometoUSA.gov and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' handbook for new lawful permanent residents are just two examples by which more and better information could be provided to immigrant professionals.
5. Identify opportunities within government for immigrant professionals to acquire American experience. Job shadowing, mentoring, internships or "mid-ternships,"* and other short-term workplace experiences can provide a valuable launching pad for immigrant professionals. Policymakers should consider whether there are opportunities – in the context of existing civil-service structures or – otherwise – to facilitate newcomers' acquisition of U.S. experience within public agencies.

Recommendations for Service Providers:

There is powerful evidence of the importance of social capital, English skills, self-improvement, and additional U.S. education in achieving economic success. We hope our study will inform the development of new programs that help immigrant jobseekers understand and develop the competencies they need to succeed in the U.S. labor market, and that providers will actively connect services designed specifically for immigrant professionals with so-called "mainstream" programs. Our specific recommendations include:

The message is clear: for immigrant professionals with limited English proficiency, investing in English language training is likely the single most powerful step an individual can take toward his or her future employability.

1. Ensure that direct-service staff, and the immigrant professionals they serve, fully understand the importance of English skills in achieving economic success. This is far from the first study to show strong correlations between English language fluency and economic success. However, our specific focus on immigrant professionals amplifies the importance of this finding for this specific population.

The message is clear: For immigrant professionals with limited English proficiency, investing in English language training is likely the single most powerful step an individual can take toward his or her future employability.

2. Communicate to immigrant jobseekers the vital role of networking and the strength of "weak ties" in the U.S. employment search. Among U.S.-born jobseekers, these job-search techniques are widely known and are a key factor in gaining referrals to hidden job opportunities, yet a relatively low percentage of our respondents reported using these approaches. Given the correlation between possess-

ing strong social capital and reporting better economic outcomes, it is imperative that immigrant professionals are not only informed about, but prepared to actively exercise, networking skills in their independent job searches. Practitioners should actively assess how immigrant professionals are currently building and

utilizing social capital, and – having done so – help jobseekers develop the networking skills required to conduct white-collar job searches in the U.S.

3. Educate immigrant professionals on the potential value of obtaining short-term "Made in America" supplements to their international education and experience. Numerous findings in this report point to U.S. employers' strong preference for American experience and training. Immigrant professionals often acquire this asset the expensive way – by investing additional years and thousands of dollars in

* Similar to an internship, a mid-ternship is an opportunity for adults to gain additional American workplace experience in their field, or to explore a new field or occupation.

U.S. higher education, in many cases unnecessarily repeating a course of study already mastered in their home country. More cost-effective ways of acquiring the “Made in America” stamp include facilitating immigrants’ exploration of other opportunities (e.g. short-term certificates, training programs, workplace internships, volunteer experience).

4. Work to build connections between mainstream career pathways programs and services designed specifically for immigrant professionals. As the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act is implemented, new opportunities are emerging to design “career pathways” that carry participants through multiple stages of education and training. Some short-term credentials available through these pathways may be appropriate for immigrant professionals who are seeking alternative careers or intermediate steps before re-licensing in their original profession.
5. Provide actionable information on gaps and opportunities to funders and policymakers. Addressing the needs of immigrant professionals is a highly specialized field. Practitioners in this arena are well-positioned to identify cross-cutting issues affecting the communities they serve and to develop and iterate potential solutions. Communicating the results of these efforts to elected officials and funders is vital in facilitating their ability to support the expansion and replication of programs that work.

Recommendations for Funders:

We hope these findings will spark grants for new education, training, and employment programs for college-educated immigrants, and that additional funding will be used to help bridge existing streams of public funding that are restricted in their ability to support this work. We also hope that foundations will support additional research to help providers design more effective programs. Our specific recommendations include:

1. Ensure that support is targeted toward interventions that work. In particular, programs serving immigrant professionals should include connec-

tions to English language learning opportunities at all levels, mechanisms to acquire U.S. workplace experience, and assistance in building and utilizing social capital.

2. Use philanthropic dollars as a bridge between other funding streams. Restrictions on public funding often hamper the ability of practitioners to provide a full range of support services over the length of time necessary to effectively serve immigrant professionals. For example, there are often few resources to support intermediate programs once immigrants test out of publicly funded entry-level English language classes and before they qualify for college-level instruction. Philanthropic dollars can provide vital resources to sustain participants’ learning momentum between programs.
3. Support additional practical research on the efficacy of different types of English language training. Immigrant professionals are faced with a plethora of options: free and fee-based, college- and community-based, varied degrees of duration, intensity, and quality. Funding rigorous research to identify common factors in positive outcomes would help immigrant professionals become more informed consumers and help practitioners to develop better designed programs.
4. Consider sponsoring opportunities for immigrant professionals to build social capital and gain U.S. experience. Given the importance of social capital in facilitating positive outcomes, funders should consider creative ways to improve immigrant professionals’ ability to acquire and exercise it. Programs such as one-day job shadowing, or even coffee meetings between U.S.-born and immigrant professionals can help to widen newcomers’ local networks. Likewise, given U.S. employers’ strong preference for American experience and training, funders should consider sponsoring “mid-ternships” or other short-term on-the-job experiences.
5. Document and publicize successes. Across the workforce and adult education fields, the program models that have been most widely adapted are

those whose impact has been carefully documented by external evaluators and well publicized. Programs such as Washington State's I-BEST model spread rapidly across the country thanks in part to a study by Columbia University's Teachers College. Adapting and replicating successful programs for skilled immigrants would greatly advance the field.

Endnotes

1. Lima, Alvaro, Mark Melnik, Kelly Dowd, Kevin Kang, and Nicoya Borella. 2014. *New Bostonians 2013-2014*. Boston: Boston Redevelopment Authority.
2. Lima, Alvaro, Mark Melnik, Kelly Dowd, Kevin Kang, and Nicoya Borella. 2014. *High-skilled Immigrants in the Massachusetts Civilian Labor Force*. Boston: Boston Redevelopment Authority.
3. Lima, Alvaro, Mark Melnik, Barry Bluestone. 2008. *Briefing Book-Labor Market Trends in Metro Boston*. Boston: Boston Redevelopment Authority.
4. Batalova, Jeanne, Michael Fix, and Peter A. Creticos. 2008. *Uneven Progress: The Employment Pathways of Skilled Immigrants in the United States*. Washington D.C.: Migration Policy Institute.

About the Partners

[World Education Services \(WES.org\)](https://www.wes.org) led this project through its Global Talent Bridge program. For more than 40 years, WES has helped highly-skilled immigrants in the U.S. and Canada achieve their academic and professional goals by leveraging and utilizing their education and training earned abroad. Through its [Global Talent Bridge program \(globaltalentbridge.org\)](https://www.globaltalentbridge.org), WES conducts outreach and provides training, tools and resources designed to ensure the successful integration of immigrant professionals, and serves as host of the IMPRINT coalition.

[IMPRINT \(imprintproject.org\)](https://www.imprintproject.org), based at WES, is a national coalition of nonprofit organizations active in the emerging field of immigrant professional integration. Working closely with partners in government, community agencies, higher education, business and other sectors, IMPRINT raises awareness of the talents and contributions of foreign-educated immigrants and refugees. The coalition works to identify and promote best practices and advocates for federal, state and local policies that facilitate the integration of immigrant professionals into the U.S. economy.

[Institute for Immigration Research \(iir.gmu.edu\)](https://www.iir.gmu.edu), the lead research partner on this project, is a joint venture between George Mason University and the Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) of Massachusetts. Its mission is to refocus the immigration conversation among academics, policy-makers and the public, including the business community and media, by producing and disseminating unbiased and objective, interdisciplinary academic research related to immigrants and immigration to the United States.

[AudioNow \(audionow.com\)](https://www.audionow.com) is the leading call-to-listen platform and provider of interactive mobile applications for broadcasters. Based in Washington D.C., AudioNow connects in-language broadcasters with hard-to-reach diaspora communities worldwide. It hosts broadcasts from more than 2,600 different radio stations in 94 languages, from the U.S., Central America, South Asia, the Philippines, Africa and the Middle East. In 2014, it broadcasted more than 2.5 billion listening minutes.

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