

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Steps To Success:

INTEGRATING IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS IN THE U.S.

By Amanda Bergson-Shilcock & James Witte, Ph.D.  
with editorial assistance from Sylvia Rusin



## About the Partners

**World Education Services (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)**, 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)**, 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)**, 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)** 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.

**The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (KnightFoundation.org)** supports transformational ideas that promote quality journalism, advance media innovation, engage communities and foster the arts. The foundation believes that democracy thrives when people and communities are informed and engaged.

---

Bergson-Shilcock, Amanda and Witte, James. *Steps to Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals in the U.S.* New York, NY: World Education Services, 2015.

Graphic design by Jouna Saza, World Education Services.

World Education Services © 2015

# Executive Summary

**I**MPRINT and its home organization World Education Services (WES) received funding from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to conduct a study to better understand how college-educated immigrant professionals integrate into the U.S. workforce. Focusing our research in the four Knight communities of Detroit, Miami, Philadelphia, and San Jose — and the additional metropolitan areas of Boston and Seattle — we collected information from what is typically a hard-to-reach population to determine the factors that have influenced their success in the workforce.

The online study surveyed 4,002 respondents, producing exciting new findings which shed light — for the first time — on the essential role that social capital, English skills, workplace acculturation and other factors play in helping immigrant professionals succeed. These thought-provoking results provide an opportunity for service providers, funders, and policymakers to think in new ways about how to facilitate immigrant professionals' abilities to contribute to and participate in American communities. The findings are summarized below, and described in more detail in our full report at [imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess](http://imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess)

## Key Findings

Our study examined immigrant achievement using three definitions of success (*see text box*). Using these definitions, we analyzed factors that correlated with the economic success and professional integration of college-educated immigrants at two income thresholds: \$30,000 and \$50,000 per year. Our reasons for selecting these thresholds can be found in the “Findings” section of our full report.

### How We Defined Success

The three definitions can be viewed as incremental levels of success, each one building upon the last:

**Earnings success** refers to immigrants who were currently employed and making at least \$50,000 per year.

**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.

We also analyzed the three definitions explained above at a lower income threshold of \$30,000 in annual income. Immigrants who fit these definitions were categorized as having *emerging* earnings, skills, or professional success.

**Findings across all of our definitions of success were robust, statistically significant, and mutually reinforcing**, which strengthened our belief that they shed important light on the process of immigrant professional integration. Overall, approximately one-third of respondents (31%) in our study had achieved earnings success, 28% had achieved skills success, and 22% had attained professional success. It is important to note that these numbers represent increasingly stringent analyses of the same pool of respondents — they are *not* mutually exclusive categories.

More specifically, we learned quite a bit about what actually increases employment for immigrant professionals, and how members of this community are living and working in the U.S. In particular:

- **Social Capital is Powerful:** There was a remarkably powerful correlation between the size of an immigrant’s self-reported social network and his or her likelihood of achieving success. Nearly half of respondents (44%) who reported currently having “many” friends and family in the U.S. to rely on had achieved earnings success, compared to 30% of those with “a few” and just 25% of respondents with “no” friends and family to rely on in the U.S.
- **English Really Matters:** Across the board, stronger English language skills were correlated with virtually every possible measure of immigrant economic success. Nearly half of respondents (40%) who reported speaking English as their primary language had achieved earnings success.
- **Immigrants Take An Enterprising Approach:** Immigrants demonstrated an enterprising, multi-pronged approach to establishing their American careers. A majority of respondents had applied for foreign academic credential evaluation. Self-improvement strategies – such as enrolling in English language classes or pursuing additional U.S. higher education – were also commonly pursued.
- **“Made in America” Boosts Employability:** Immigrants who had invested in additional U.S. education were more likely to be employed and successful than those who had only received education abroad.
- **Time + Acculturation Help Drive Success:** The virtuous cycle of acculturation, social capital and time combined to foster greater success among respondents who had lived in the U.S. for at least six years. In particular, these respondents had on average significantly higher incomes, lower rates of unemployment, and better English skills.

They were also more likely to have volunteered in their communities, and were twice as likely to say they had “many” friends and family compared to respondents who arrived in the U.S. more recently.

- **Newshounds Are Also Volunteers:** Intriguingly, there was a strong, statistically significant relationship between the number of news sources that a respondent reported using, and his or her likelihood of serving as a volunteer. These indicators of *civic* integration may also help to improve the understanding of *economic* integration among immigrant professionals.



## BRAIN WASTE

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

According to the Migration Policy Institute, there are approximately **7.2 million college-educated immigrants in the U.S.** An estimated **52% of these immigrants obtained their degree 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.

# Recommendations

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

## 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 that will help them 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:

1. **Ensure that direct-service staff, and the immigrant professionals they serve, fully understand the importance of English skills in achieving economic success.** Ours 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 limited English proficient immigrant professionals, investing in English language training is likely the single most powerful step an individual can take toward his or her future employability.

**The message is clear: For limited English proficient immigrant professionals, 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 strong correlation between possessing strong social capital and reporting better economic outcomes, it is imperative that immigrant professionals be 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 our 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 U.S. higher education, in many cases repeating an unnecessary 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.

## 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 connections 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 services across the full range of supports or length of time necessary to effectively serve immigrant professionals. For example, immigrant professionals are often eligible for entry-level English language classes through the state and federally funded adult education system. However, there are often few resources to support intermediate programs once these participants test out of publicly funded 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 to help immigrant professionals gain American seasoning.
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. Evaluating and lifting up successful programs for skilled immigrants in these ways would be a powerful influence in advancing the field.

## For Policymakers

---

We urge that after a decade of budget cuts, funding be restored 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.
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. **Similarly, use existing processes to disseminate information to immigrant professionals.** Websites and resources such as [WelcometoUSA.gov](http://WelcometoUSA.gov) and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' handbook for new lawful permanent residents are just two examples of mechanisms 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.

For further information visit  
[imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess](http://imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess)



WORLD EDUCATION SERVICES

wes.org

*In partnership with*



imprintproject.org



iir.gmu.edu



audionow.com

*With support from*

