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How Community Colleges Can Support Internationally Trained Immigrants and Refugees

With their emphasis on short-term certifications and accessible workforce preparation programs, community colleges in the United States are **uniquely positioned to support the economic inclusion of immigrants and refugees.** Yet a **recent national survey** conducted by Upwardly Global found that many community college administrators feel that their schools are underresourced when it comes to supporting immigrants. Indeed, almost 80 percent of survey respondents stated that their community college does not have sufficient resources to address the academic and career needs of immigrant and refugee students.

While more could be achieved with increased funding, there are replicable steps that some community colleges have taken to move toward providing sustainable programming.

Who are internationally educated immigrants and refugees?

In the U.S., more than two million immigrants and refugees with college degrees are unemployed or underemployed. **Sixty percent of these individuals hold credentials earned abroad.** Many have years of specialized training and advanced degrees.



[Read some of their stories.](#)

What barriers do internationally trained immigrants and refugees face as they seek career advancement in the U.S.?



Credential recognition

The process of evaluating and validating international credentials can be complex, costly, and time-consuming.



Navigating community college programs

It can be difficult for internationally trained immigrants to navigate the differences between credit, noncredit, and workforce development programs at community colleges. In addition, many community colleges do not have formalized processes for recruiting, enrolling, or onboarding these students. Because of confusing admission documentation, students may misidentify themselves as F-1 students, choose not to enroll, select incorrect programs, miss out on funding support, or misclassify their immigration status.



Language proficiency

Community colleges often do not have diverse methods of assessment and language support needed to meet the wide range of English proficiency levels among immigrant and refugee students.



Access to opportunity

Limited professional networks and job market access make it difficult for immigrants to enter alternative programs such as fellowships, mentoring programs, or apprenticeships.



Wraparound supports

Limited connections to supports such as transportation, food services, housing, childcare, and legal services can impede access to academic and career opportunities.

Why should community colleges invest in this population?



Economic Contributions

Internationally educated immigrants and refugees can fill workforce gaps and stimulate local economies. [The American Immigration Council indicates that in 2021, immigrants paid nearly \\$525 billion in taxes and had over \\$1.4 trillion in spending power.](#) Community colleges can further support local economies by increasing immigrant enrollment and providing students with in-demand skills and credentials.



Overall Competitiveness

Offering programs that harness the existing education and experience of immigrants and refugees can bolster partnerships between community colleges and employers who hire graduates of such programs, especially if they are industry-certified.



Education and Upward Mobility

Community colleges provide accessible education and training, particularly in the health care and teaching fields, facilitating economic mobility and supporting local communities.



Diversity and Inclusion

Attracting and supporting internationally trained immigrant and refugee students promotes diversity and inclusion within community colleges.

What steps can community colleges take to support internationally trained immigrants and refugees?

Community colleges should begin by assessing available data on the internationally trained population in their communities to help identify the specific barriers faced by immigrants with international education.



See how the [Kalamazoo Valley Community College secured a grant](#) to gain more insight into its local community.

To ensure that prospective students can overcome individual and systemic barriers, community colleges can focus on recognition of international credentials, career-specific language skills, and pathways to commensurate jobs:



Step 1

Ensure recognition of credentials.

Getting credentials from an academic institution abroad can be a lengthy and complex process. Community colleges address this barrier in several ways:

- Establishing relationships with credential evaluation organizations that are recognized by the **National Association of Credential Evaluation Services** (NACES).
- Providing resources and additional support to those who have refugee or asylee status, or who are otherwise displaced and cannot access their complete academic records because of adverse circumstances in the country where they studied. **The WES Gateway Program**, for example, is designed to ensure that eligible students can obtain a reliable assessment of their academic achievements.
- Advocating state funding of affordable or free credential evaluation services for immigrants and refugees. Several states, including Idaho, Nevada, and Texas, **have found creative ways to use existing funds** to cover these services.

Questions for your team to consider:

- Are we currently offering guidance for the credential evaluation process?
- How can we access funds to help students pay for the credential evaluation process?
- What workforce development programs can our institution offer to prospective students who have obtained credential evaluations?
- Can **credit for prior learning** processes be implemented to award credit when academic documents are not accessible?
- Can we partner with a WES Gateway referral organization in our state to support displaced students who may not have access to the necessary documents needed for traditional evaluation processes?

Who does this well? The Empowering Professional Immigrant Careers (EPIC) program at **Chemeketa Community College** has developed a career-focused program that includes a credential evaluation report. **Read more.**



Step 2

Offer bridge programs with targeted workforce English training goals, and consider working with adult education programs and local government to utilize federal and state funding.

Questions for your team to consider:

- Are we currently offering classes that specifically serve this community? If not, do we have the capacity and resources to offer more tailored programming?
- [Can we access Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\) funds to pay for such course offerings?](#)
- How can we work with adult education programs to identify potential students and offer virtual or hybrid customized programming?

Who does this well? [Austin Community College](#) offers classes for internationally trained immigrants and refugees, including one-on-one support from adult education coordinators. The [NYC Welcome Back Center at LaGuardia Community College](#) offers case management, licensing guidance, and assistance with understanding related careers for internationally trained nurses.



Step 3

Consider offering short-term workforce credential programs (including digital literacy and résumé-writing) and career pathway guidance.

Questions for your team to consider:

- Are we currently offering guidance on alternative career options and retraining?
- Are we able to work with other community programs to offer alternative workforce credential courses?
- Do we have the capacity and resources to develop career pathways and counseling services?

Who does this well? [Miami Dade College](#) offers a program for internationally trained immigrants to continue their career in the U.S. through credential evaluation support and career advice for credit and noncredit programs, including short-term certifications.



Step 4

Focus on developing partnerships with organizations—such as adult education centers, resettlement agencies, and workforce centers—that can contribute expertise and capacity.

Questions for your team to consider:

- What is the scope of our college’s international student office outside of the traditional services to students with F-1 visas? Is the office equipped to advise immigrant students and to address their concerns?
- Do we publicly describe what our college has to offer immigrant students? Are adult education program staff aware of these offerings?

Who does this well? [The Highline College \(Puget Sound Welcome Back Center at Highline College\)](#) works with local refugee- and immigrant-serving organizations that collaborate with the college on referrals, local job search, and other support services.



Step 5

Collaborate with employers, local partners, and immigrant-serving organizations to develop and offer networking opportunities and on-the-job training.

Questions for your team to consider:

- What local industries face workforce shortages?
- Which community partners—such as employers, workforce centers, or chambers of commerce—are expressing interest in including immigrant and refugee talent in their workforce?
- Have we considered alternative programs, such as fellowships, [mentoring programs](#), or [workforce education](#)?

Who does this well? [Howard Community College \(HCC\)](#) has developed a career program for internationally trained immigrants that works through community partner collaboration and focuses on providing comprehensive career support.

Additional Resources

[Unlocking Potential: Enhancing Community College Services for Immigrant and Refugee Students \(report\)](#)

[Promising Practices: 14 Community College Programs that serve Immigrant Students \(book\)](#)

[Steps To Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals in the U.S. \(research report\)](#)

[Research: Leaving Money on the Table: The Persistence of Brain Waste among College-Educated Immigrants \(report\)](#)

[WES Global Talent Bridge Community College Guide \(report\)](#)

[WES Career Pathways Tool \(tool\)](#)

[The Role of Navigators in IELCE/IET Career Pathways \(report\)](#)

[Increasing Opportunities for Immigrant Students: Community College Strategies for Success \(report\)](#)

[Pima Community College – Immigrant and Refugee Student Resource Center \(website\)](#)