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# Refugee Students in Community Colleges: How Colleges Can Respond to an Emerging Demographic Challenge

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# Refugee Students in Community Colleges: How Colleges Can Respond to an Emerging Demographic Challenge

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*This practice brief provides recommendations for community college leaders in addressing the educational needs of refugee students in community colleges. Despite increasingly diverse immigrant populations at community colleges, there is limited research examining refugee students and their needs in higher education settings. Educational needs related to social support, cultural competency of the campus community, and financial assistance are found to be salient for refugee students. Implications for community colleges are discussed from the perspective of validation and community cultural wealth. Strategies that meet the needs of refugee students include expanding social networks that involve local community organizations, developing specific support programs for refugees, facilitating culturally-responsive teaching and learning practices, and considering demographic trends of refugees in strategic planning efforts.*

Keywords: refugee students; culturally-responsive instruction; educational needs

Based on available research and from a framework of validation theory (Rendón, 1994) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), this practice brief provides recommendations for community college leaders and planners in addressing the educational needs of

refugee students in community college. Refugees are a special class of individuals related, but distinct in important ways, to the broad category of immigrant students who have received increasing attention in the higher education research literature (Szelényi &

Chang, 2002; Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez-Orozco, 2011). With more people forcibly displaced due to war and conflict than at any time since the post-World War II era (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2016), and their reliance here in the United States on open and low-cost higher education institutions (Hollands, 2012; Kim & Diaz, 2013), there is a critical need for greater attention on their unique needs.

### **Refugees and Immigrants**

According to the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is a person forced “outside of his or her country of nationality or residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion; and is unwilling or unable to avail him or herself of the protection of that country or to return there for fear of persecution” (UNHCR, 2011, p. 3). Refugee status is a technical legal term, though in practice, the definition also applies to persons forcibly pushed from their home countries to escape war, other armed conflict, and generalized violence (UNHCR, 2014), since many have the same traumatic experiences regardless of legal classification.

By the end of 2015, there were 65.3 million forcibly displaced individuals in the world, of which 21.3 million were refugees (UNHCR, 2016), a considerable increase from 19.5 million in 2014, and 16.7 million in 2013 (UNHCR, 2014, 2015). Recent refugees largely came from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia,

Sudan, and Congo (UNHCR, 2016). The United States, Canada, Australia, and Norway were the top resettlement countries in 2015. In 2016, the United States legally admitted about 84,000 refugees from Congo, Syria, Burma, Iraq and Somalia (United States Department of State, 2016).

There is a tendency for the public and educational practitioners alike to group all foreign-born individuals together. Indeed, the terms “immigrant” and “foreign born” are used interchangeably to refer to persons with no United States citizenship at birth. Immigrants, broadly speaking, make up an increasingly large portion of students in community colleges. It is estimated that a third of all 7.5 million students in community colleges come from families who migrated to the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). Yet surprisingly little scholarly research makes distinctions in the diversity among their backgrounds (Conway, 2010; Kim & Díaz, 2013; Prins & Toso, 2012; Szelényi & Chang, 2002). Immigrants, though, by federal definition include refugees, asylum-seekers, naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents (green card holders), persons on temporary visas, and the undocumented (Nwosu, Batalova, & Auclair, 2014). Being foreign-born may be the only common characteristic among immigrants, as the profile and needs of each are distinct from other foreign-born populations in important ways.

In the United States, refugee services include—to some extent—trauma counseling, housing assistance, medical care, employment services, and

integration programs. Refugees are legally allowed to work, and receive the same public benefits and services as US citizens (Lyons, 2008; University of Pittsburgh, 2014). Many refugees seek to attend some form of educational institution, in particular community colleges (Hollands, 2012). Little attention has been given to examining their experience and needs in these institutions (Hollands, 2012; Taffer, 2010).

### **Refugees in Community College**

The purpose of this practice brief is to derive recommendations for community college practitioners and planners that may benefit refugee students, based on a synthetic reading of the limited literature. What little research there is relating to refugees in community college, and higher education generally, has been largely tangential to other related immigrant groups. To date, the issue of refugee status has largely been framed in relation to studies regarding undocumented students, first-generation college students, and students identified or identifying as of Hispanic or Latino descent (Conway, 2010; Prins & Toso, 2012; Teranishi et al., 2011). Though some individuals among the migrant and immigrant populations within these subgroups do have refugee experiences, the findings from the research only go so far to inform college leaders, planners, and faculty in addressing the particular issues facing refugee college students. Refugees pursuing higher education face many challenges stemming directly from their forced displacement. Disrupted schooling, living in transient

camps, being separated from families, and losing loved ones in war result in health and socio-emotional problems that can affect learning and adaptation (Iversen, Sveass, & Morken, 2012; Joyce, Earnest, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Stebleton, 2007; Taffer, 2010). The college experience can be overwhelming for recently-arrived refugee students with limited skills and education, many coming from non-industrialized areas. They are expected to juggle new roles while simultaneously learning English, adapting to a new country, finding a job or working, and studying (Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Joyce et al., 2010).

Refugees are also relatively more economically disadvantaged than other immigrants, such that they are likely to attend relatively lower-cost community colleges or publicly-funded adult education centers rather than four-year colleges (Hollands, 2012; Perry, 2008). Nonetheless, once at community college, refugee students encounter challenges related to culture, adjustment, and language, which combine with the lack of services specific to their educational needs (Hollands, 2012; Taffer, 2010). These barriers unsurprisingly can result in the refugee students' non-completion of their studies and under-preparation for the workforce (Connor, 2010; Hollands, 2012).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The educational needs of refugee students can be understood from a framework of validation theory (Rendón, 1994) and community cultural wealth

(Yosso, 2005). Validation theory was initially developed to speak to the issues of non-traditional, low-income, first-generation college students, and adult students returning to college. It describes two types of validation provided by agents in and out of class or institution: (a) Academic validation describes actions taken to ensure students are valuable and successful members of the learning community, and (b) Interpersonal validation describes actions fostering student personal development and social adjustment. It is an asset-based perspective which recognizes that students already have the capacity to succeed in college, but need the validation of in-and-out of class agents (such as faculty, peers, staff, family members) to foster student agency, internal strength, and liberation from past invalidation in order to shape their own lives (Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth also views students as assets in the college environment. According to Yosso, socially marginalized student groups already possess at least one form of capital that often goes unrecognized. Briefly, the six forms of capital that comprise community cultural wealth are: (a) aspirational (ability to maintain hopes and dreams despite setbacks), (b) linguistic (ability to communicate in more than one language), (c) familial (knowledge about maintaining connections to family and community), (d) social (ability to seek contacts for support), (e) navigational (ability to maneuver through social institutions), and (f) resistant (ability to challenge inequity).

Community cultural wealth is a critique of deficit perspectives to explain

social inequity. Traditionally, valuable cultural capital (e.g. education, language) and social capital (e.g. networks, connections) were thought to be acquired through one's upper or middle class family and/or formal schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). As a result, many educational institutions tend to operate under the assumption that "disadvantaged" students, often people of color, lack the skills, knowledge, resources, and capital (Valenzuela, 1999) for social mobility.

For refugees, deficit perspectives such as these threaten to diminish their capacities in light of empirical evidence of a "refugee gap" (Connor, 2010, p. 377). Relative to other immigrants, refugees have less English proficiency, less education, poorer health, different household structures, and live in poorer neighborhoods. Many refugee students in the literature report having difficulties adjusting to and navigating the college environment and their resettled communities, presumably due to the lack of cultural and social capital resulting from these situations (e.g. Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Morrice, 2009, 2013; Warriner, 2010). However, Yosso (2005) argued that traditional notions of social and cultural capital do not consider the perspectives of non-White, non-middle class populations, such that refugee students do have the capital, but capital which may go unrecognized outside of what is normally valued in the college environment. Using validation theory and community cultural wealth as asset-based perspectives, members of the community college can create validating and inclusive environments

where students can thrive and realize their strengths and potential.

### **Serving Refugee Students in Community College**

Most research about refugees in higher education examines their experiences in four-year university settings (Earnest et al., 2010; Ferede, 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Morrice, 2009, 2013; Xiong & Lam, 2013). Even so, findings from these studies may have implications for community college leaders in creating culturally-responsive environments and corresponding practices to meet their educational needs. This section addresses community colleges' current best practices in immigrant student support that may also be relevant for refugee students.

### **College Environment and Campus Support**

Refugee students face challenges navigating bureaucratic processes such as applying for financial aid and validating prior qualifications (Morrice, 2013; Reyes, 2013; Taffer, 2010). Community colleges such as Westchester Community College in New York, and Palm Beach State College in Florida have formal programs in place to provide tours for immigrant students on campus, invite guest speakers from different college service offices, or conduct orientation workshops (Lowe, 2014). However, despite higher education institutions offering various student support in tutoring, counseling, career advising, and others, refugee students may not

be aware of their availability due to programs being culturally ill-suited (Earnest et al., 2010) or unacceptable as offered to some native cultures (Szelényi & Chang, 2002).

Career and academic advising have been found to be especially necessary (Morrice, 2013). Advisors need to consider factors that extend to the effects of trauma, forced displacement, and pressures associated with resettlement, not just the financial constraints, cultural expectations, and time demands that may affect students' abilities to decide, plan, and prepare for a career (Joyce et al., 2010; Morrice, 2013; Stebleton, 2007). For instance, Stebleton (2007) noted that many African refugee college students were separated from their families during forced displacement. They experienced loss, grief, depression, anxiety, or guilt leaving their family members behind, and are uncertain about ever returning home or seeing family members again because of ongoing violence in their home countries. During resettlement, they are also concerned about the ambiguity of employment opportunities that may be related to previous work experiences, and perceptions that their race and religion may pose boundaries in certain work environments (Joyce et al., 2010; Stebleton, 2007). Such contextual and external factors may influence their decisions about short-range and long-range career planning. Although refugees receive state-sponsored trauma counseling upon arrival (Lyons, 2008), community colleges can still offer continued post-migration support to refugee students on campus. In addition, programs for mental health and trauma

counseling must consider culturally-relevant practices for therapy and coping (Yakushko, Watson, & Thompson, 2008).

Many refugee students avoid taking out loans, as they are already working to send remittances to relatives back home, are unfamiliar with the financial aid systems in their resettled country, are unaware of its availability, or have previously been denied credit or loans since immigrating (Morrice, 2013; Stebleton, 2007). Therefore, it is critical for refugee students to receive orientation to financial aid availability and options.

The sense of community inside and outside of the higher education institution is important to the mental and social wellbeing of refugee students (Joyce et al., 2010), as well as to strengthen familial and social capital (Yosso, 2005). Refugee students typically have relatively weak personal support systems due to demanding work schedules, difficulties in communicating in English, not sharing culturally-accepted social norms and other cultural barriers (Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Morrice, 2013). Facilitating culturally-responsive programs and services for refugee students require a coordinated approach among college units and in concert with community service organizations (Earnest et al., 2010; Reyes, 2013; Taffer, 2010).

Designated support persons (e.g. mentor, volunteer student, or liaison) are beneficial in refugee students' college transition and adjustment (Earnest et al., 2010; Taffer, 2010). Community colleges such as Westchester Community College, Hostos Community College, and Palm Beach State College arrange for

programs welcoming immigrant and refugee students to the campus community, introduce them to the various campus services, orient them to how higher education operates, and educate them on how to succeed within the culture of higher education (Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Lowe, 2014). Campus services can host weekend social events and activities especially for working refugee students to build friendships and social support with other students.

Connecting refugee students to members of their culture or ethnicity is another way to create a sense of belongingness, strengthen cultural wealth, and validate cultural identities (Earnest et al., 2010; Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Reyes, 2013; Taffer, 2010). Campus services can establish student clubs and host events with partner ethnic community centers, refugee resettlement agencies, church groups, and other educational institutions so students can regularly meet, interact, and find varied types of support.

### **Campus Community Members**

The cultural competence of faculty, staff, and administrators of a higher education institution is key to refugee students' adjustment and engagement in higher education (Hollands, 2012). Earnest et al. (2010) listed a number of challenges pertaining to cultural sensitivity and competence. Campus faculty and staff have been found to be helpful and encouraging, while others lack a certain level of understanding and empathy toward refugees. Refugee students are not asked about their backgrounds,

experiences, or what challenges they faced or currently facing that may affect their adjustment, engagement, and learning. Instead of validating students' experiences and identities, instructors and administrators may sometimes assume that all refugees have basic or little knowledge, skills, and education, despite some refugees having completed professional degrees in their origin countries.

The cultural competence of multiple members of the campus community is integral to building a responsive and conducive campus environment (Reyes, 2013). Cultural competency goes by several, interchangeable terms such as "cross-cultural capability," "intercultural sensitivity," and "cultural fluency" (Jones, 2013). It is defined as a "dynamic ongoing, interactive, self-reflective learning process that transforms attitudes, skills and knowledge for effective and appropriate communication and interaction across cultures" (Freeman et al., 2009, p. 1). Developing cultural competence goes beyond understanding ethnic cultures. It requires creating avenues for communication and interaction with students, and providing training for faculty, staff, and administrators on cross-cultural awareness and interpersonal validation of students (Earnest et al., 2010; Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Perry, 2008; Reyes, 2013; Stebleton, 2007; Taffer, 2010). For instance, Lowe (2014) related how at Prince George Community College in Largo, Maryland, approximately 25 instructors volunteered an hour of their time a week to answer questions and talk to immigrant students about academic and

personal matters. This is an example of how structured interaction with immigrants, along with formal training, can develop cultural competence in campus members.

### Teaching and Learning

Differences in teaching and learning practices also may affect the engagement and learning of refugee students in higher education. First, many educators emphasize self-directed and independent learning (Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010). Refugee students may be more familiar with group work, or instructor-driven coursework (Joyce et al., 2010; Taffer, 2010). Language barriers also result in more time comprehending the learning material especially in academic English. Refugee students often feel that courses move too fast for them, or have difficulties communicating with the instructor due to differences in English accents (Earnest et al., 2010; Prokop, 2013). Writing in academic English is particularly difficult as refugee students may have no previous experience in academic writing (Earnest et al., 2010; Perry, 2008).

Culturally competent college instructors can design curricula and facilitate learning that can help strengthen cultural capital and provide academic validation. Since many refugee students come from countries where teaching and learning methods differ from Western contexts (Joyce et al., 2010; Reyes, 2013), instructors can consider a combination of what students are familiar with and what is typically practiced in the classroom, such as combining lectures with

group discussion and independent or self-directed learning methods. Group discussions in particular have been found helpful in increasing support networks (Joyce et al., 2010). Instructors must also be aware of the diversity of refugee students, and be sensitive to what teaching and learning practices work for individuals of different backgrounds. Perry (2008) noted that the autobiography and story-telling methods were suitable and empowering for African refugee students because these methods incorporated culturally-inherent practices into the development of their writing, speaking, and presentation skills. However, Perry (2008) cautioned that these methods may not be suitable for all refugees who do not want to recall their traumatic experiences.

Second, many refugee students come from non-industrialized backgrounds, and may find it challenging to complete assignments and do research using unfamiliar technology (Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010). Instructors are thus encouraged to provide refugee students with information on where to get help in completing assignments, such as the campus computer or writing centers (Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Hollands, 2012; Prokop, 2013). Refugee students can benefit from supplemental instruction, tutors, or study groups, where they can not only get help with technology and coursework, but also practice English skills and build social networks. Research also shows that college classes focus more on local issues, whereas refugee students feel they can more confidently contribute to discussions on international issues based on

prior or related experiences (Earnest et al., 2010; Warriner, 2010). Thus, instructors are encouraged to design curricula that include topics that raise awareness about international or diversity issues, and engage refugee student participation (Earnest et al., 2010; Reyes, 2013).

Finally, refugees attend higher education institutions to build skills for meaningful employment and self-sufficiency. Because many of them do not come from countries with English as the primary language, almost all of them receive some form of ESL education upon arrival. Warriner (2010) stated that since ESL is one of the first (and sometimes only) forms of education they will receive, the ESL curricula has a significant role in preparing refugees for the workforce as well as create a sense of belonging in the resettled community. A rigorous ESL curriculum must be aligned with the work experiences of refugee students, connected to work values and contexts of the resettled community, and proficient enough for refugee students to confidently gain entry into credit level courses (Prokop, 2013; Warriner, 2010). Such a curriculum is an example of integrated instruction, which is a form of contextualized learning that combines instruction in basic academic skills with instruction in job skills. Integrated instruction has established a record of success (Jenkins, 2005; Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2010) and is especially effective with adult students returning to school (Jobs for the Future, 2007).

## Conclusion

Refugee students experience a variety of challenges in learning and adapting to the college environment and their new communities. Many recently-arrived refugees are adults with limited skills and education who are expected to move beyond the trauma of their recent past and adapt to a new culture, while simultaneously having to learn English, find a job, and care for their families. In addressing the educational needs of refugee students, it is important to consider the context of validation, and create college environments that affirm and strengthen their community cultural wealth. Meeting refugee students' educational needs through culturally competent college environments have the potential to facilitate successful transitions into their new communities, the workforce, and society. To accomplish this desirable goal requires the same kind of holistic institutional improvement resulting from partnerships of cross-institutional actors with community stakeholders. This practice brief provides initial direction for community college leaders, but due to the limited related literature, the empirical evidence only goes so far to inform practice in specific ways. As more evidence arises through needed research, the voices of those teaching and managing instruction are necessary to develop educational policies and practices that are effective and sustainable for this population (Torraco, 2014).

How can a community college provide culturally competent environments needed by refugee students? The first

step is for colleges to simply identify which of their students are refugees, being mindful that they are often grouped together under other labels in reporting and planning, and so may be hidden in plain sight. In the near term, interventions, practices, and policies should be evaluated and improved. In the longer term, college leaders need to consider the increasing number of refugee students, and therefore plan accordingly so that community colleges live up to their missions as gateways to postsecondary education for these individuals who may otherwise have few means to access higher education in a new land.

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