

Executive Summary Unlocking Potential:

Enhancing Community College Services
for Immigrant and Refugee Students



2023

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Unlocking Potential:

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As the United States gears up for a future where all growth in the working-age population will stem from immigrants and their children, a striking contradiction looms: Nearly 2.4 million educated immigrants remain unemployed or underemployed, on the fringes of the American workforce. Over two decades, Upwardly Global has been at the heart of this challenge, supporting nearly 10,000 immigrants, refugees, and asylees into professional-level jobs that contribute over \$50 million annually to local economies.

In order to advance our goal of dismantling employment barriers for immigrant workers, investing in the community college ecosystem — which serves as an accessible pathway to workforce inclusion — is imperative. While nearly one-third of community college students are of immigrant-origin, these institutions face substantial hurdles in supporting this population at all skill levels, with limited research on effective programs and interventions that bridge disparities.

As the U.S. faces critical labor shortages, it is more important than ever to address these barriers and unlock the untapped talent and potential of internationally trained professionals. Even more so, as the population ages and baby boomers retire.

8.8 million
job openings
in the U.S., but only
6.4 million
unemployed workers.



Nearly
1/3
of community
college students
are of immigrant-
origin.

But newcomers often find it difficult to navigate the vast array of credit and noncredit courses and short-term certificates offered by community colleges to help advance their careers. Moreover, community college practitioners say that they lack the financial resources and staffing to effectively meet the workforce development needs of immigrant and refugee students, especially those with prior educational and career credentials.

This report presents fresh insights on career services in community colleges for immigrant students, detailing best practices, addressing gaps, and offering strategies to dismantle employment barriers. Conducted between May and August 2023, the report draws from key stakeholder interviews and in-depth focus groups with community college practitioners across California and Texas, as well as national survey data from over 80 practitioners, with funding from the Lumina Foundation and research partners at the National Council for Workforce Education.

Best Practices

and Bright Spots

1) Increased focus on short-term credentials:

Community colleges are now offering micro-credentials and short-term certificates in response to job market needs, providing quick pathways to employment and career growth for diverse student populations.

2) Data collection:

Practitioners are acutely aware of the need to collect data tracking the backgrounds of immigrant-origin students as well as program outcomes, and some are moving in that direction.

3) Emphasis on case managers and career navigators:

A few institutions employ knowledgeable case managers to provide critical guidance and support to students at various points, such as intake, enrollment, ESL classes, and career plan mapping.

4) Building trust and a sense of community:

Several community college practitioners emphasize the importance of building trust and creating a sense of community to support immigrants and refugees.



50% of
respondents
say their college
tracks data on immigrants
and refugees.

40%
say they track data on
immigrants and refugees
and their professional
background.

Addressing Gaps and Barriers

1) Insufficient data tracking on immigrants and refugees:

- Challenges in tracking data due to undocumented students' privacy concerns.
- Siloed data between departments, limiting efficacy and access.

2) Lack of differentiated career services for immigrants and refugees:

- General career services not tailored to immigrant students' unique needs.
- Services such as welcome centers, counseling, and apprenticeship programs often operate in isolation.

3) Difficulty building employer partnership pipelines:

- Challenges in forming skill-based partnerships with employers.
- Preference for traditional education and career pathways by some employers, disadvantaging immigrant professionals.

4) Limited resources and knowledge base to serve immigrants and refugees:

- Need for better-trained staff to support immigrant and refugee students.
- Lack of information on career pathways and educational choices for this demographic.

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Only 10%
of community colleges surveyed are currently meeting the need to support re-credentialing and career reentry.

30%
have no programs to support re-credentialing and career reentry.

The Path Forward

Meeting the distinct needs of immigrants and refugees in career services within community colleges necessitates collaborative leadership, strategic investment, and engagement with various stakeholders for effective program implementation and support.

1) Explore diverse and sustainable sources of funding:

Securing a diverse range of federal, state, local, and private funding is essential, but it's crucial to ensure the stability and sustainability of these funding sources.

2) Invest in career services:

Career services departments play a pivotal role in providing specialized support to immigrant and refugee students, offering early career advice, utilizing online resources for job search preparation, and facilitating educational and job advancement opportunities.

3) Increase the professional development of faculty and staff:

Ongoing training should include cultural sensitivity, the awareness of immigrants' distinct barriers, and a mastery of career navigation strategies like aiding in licensure processes, guiding U.S. job searches, and fostering professional networks.

4) Leverage statewide and national networks:

These networks can play a key role in the expansion, replication, continuous improvement, and scaling of programs.

5) Engage key stakeholders in the ecosystem:

- **Community colleges** should continue to develop targeted services like data tracking, differentiated career services, and employer partnerships.
- **Employers** can offer work-based learning opportunities like internships and apprenticeships as well as practice skill-based hiring that values noncredit credentials.
- **Workforce agencies** can collaborate to identify in-demand skills, align training programs with labor market needs, train immigrant-focused career coaches, and provide job placement services.
- **Community-based organizations** can provide wraparound services like housing, food, and legal assistance, offer cultural and language services, and build trust within the community.

The community college ecosystem provides immigrants and refugees with vital skills and intercultural learning experiences that enrich the U.S. workforce and its communities. Despite progress, gaps persist for immigrant-origin students, necessitating critical investments in resources and capacity building, as well as a collective effort among community colleges, workforce agencies, and community-based organizations.

Upwardly Global remains committed to addressing this critical issue, sharing insights as we collaborate with partners to advocate for enhanced funding and policies. We invite all to follow this issue, share your own findings, and join us in our goal to create inclusive education and workforce systems for the benefit of all.