



CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON
College-Workforce Transitions

Documenting Higher Education for Refugees in Wisconsin

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This report presents preliminary findings from a study documenting the obstacles and pathways to higher education for refugees in Wisconsin. The study is based on interviews and observations with refugee resettlement service providers and educators who support the college goals and attainment of refugees. The findings indicate (1) policy goals and constraints that complicate and obstruct efforts to support higher education for refugees, and (2) obstacles and networks that present barriers to refugees in accessing and succeeding in higher education. We discuss how resettlement services providers access various social networks to support refugees in overcoming such obstacles. The report concludes with a discussion of practical implications and future research directions to support higher education for refugees.

Introduction to higher education for refugees

Refugee resettlement policy and context

The current refugee resettlement policy regime was established by the Refugee Act of 1980, which defined “refugee,” established a procedure for delimiting the annual number of refugees resettled in the United States, and made provisions for the financial, medical, and social services available to refugees.¹ In 2014, more than 2 million refugees had been resettled into the United States since the Act’s passage.² The U.S. Department of State’s Population, Refugees and Migration division coordinates with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in placing refugees and contracts with religious and charitable “Voluntary Agencies” that handle the resettlement into U.S. communities. The State Department also conducts background checks on refugees prior to resettlement, which is a process that has intensified in scrutiny since the U.S.A. Patriot Act. Successful applicants can wait more than two years to complete this process.³

In 2011, the U.S National Security Staff released a review of the domestic resettlement process, which indicated a need for increased federal assistance as “funding levels for these programs have failed to keep pace with the needs of refugees and local communities.”⁴ Unfortunately, this situation of inadequate funding to support refugee resettlement has become substantially worse under the Trump Administration, which has made good on then-candidate Trump’s anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric by slashing the budget for resettlement services⁵ and increasing the already “extreme vetting” of refugees.⁶

¹ Leibowitz, A. H. (1983). The Refugee Act of 1980: Problems and congressional concerns. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 467(1), 163-171. Thien-Huong, N. T. (2013). Refugee Act (1980). In Carlos E. Cortés (ed.), *Multicultural America: A Multimedia Encyclopedia*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

² Brown, A., & Scribner, T. (2014). Unfulfilled promises, future possibilities: The refugee resettlement system in the United States. *Journal on Migration & Human Security*, 2(2), 101-120.

³ Kerwin, D. (2015). The US refugee protection system on the 35th anniversary of the Refugee Act of 1980. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 3(2), 205-254.

⁴ Brown & Scribner, 2014. *Ibid*.

⁵ Davis, J. H., & Sengupta, S. (2017, September 18). Trump Administration rejects study showing positive impact of refugees. *New York Times*, Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/us/politics/refugees-revenue-cost-report-trump.html>

⁶ Rosenberg, M. (2018, February 14). Exclusive: Dozen of refugee resettlement offices to close as Trump downsizes program. *Reuters*, Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-refugees-exclusive/exclusive-dozens-of-refugee-resettlement-offices-to-close-as-trump-downsizes-program-idUSKCN1FY1EJ>

The Trump Administration recently announced the Presidential Determination for the new fiscal year, which sets the ceiling for the number refugees admitted through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program. The determination dropped the ceiling from 45,000 refugees to its historic low of 30,000. As low as these numbers are given the high international need for refugee protection and resettlement, the U.S. State Department reported that only 20,918 refugees were resettled in 2017. That number is well below even the amount of refugees resettled during the most recent historical period of anti-immigration nationalism—the two years following the September 11th terrorist attacks.⁷

Refugees in Wisconsin

The Voluntary Agencies contracted by the State Department to conduct resettlement in Wisconsin are World Relief in Appleton and Oshkosh, the International Institute of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Lutheran Social Services in Milwaukee and Madison, and Jewish Social Services in Madison. Because of the dramatic decline in refugee admissions under the Trump Administration, Catholic Social Services in Milwaukee concluded its resettlement program in summer 2018, having resettled more than 700 people in Wisconsin over 42 years of work.⁸

Prior to the Refugee Act of 1980, the largest group of refugees resettled in Wisconsin were the Hmong, who started coming in larger numbers after the failure of the U.S. anti-communist wars in Southeast Asia. As of 2010, there were 47,127 Hmong in Wisconsin. While the Hmong community in Wisconsin has struggled with both high poverty levels and low educational attainment, there nonetheless has been a considerable increase in Hmong college graduation rates over the past two decades. From 2006-2010, about 13% of Hmong in Wisconsin had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, having doubled since the 2000 census. While these gains are impressive, in comparison to the overall population of Wisconsin the Hmong's college attainment remains relatively low.⁹

Currently, refugee resettlement in Wisconsin is concentrated in Milwaukee, Winnebago, and Dane counties, with the top three countries of origin for 2016 and 2017 being Burma, Congo, and Somalia. The total refugee intake in 2016 was 1,719. In 2017 it was 1,003, which was more than a one-third decrease in the number of refugees resettled in the state over that time period. The indication is that for the current fiscal year that number will decrease even more.¹⁰

During this period of reduced refugee admission, Wisconsin's refugee resettlement providers, educators, and community organizers focus on supporting the refugees currently in our communities, as well as the few that are arriving, by maintaining the institutional knowledge and community networks necessary to support refugee resettlement.

Higher education for refugees

A number of treaty mandates to which the United States is signatory require the provision of equitable schooling to refugee children, such as Article 22 of the Geneva Conventions and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Primary and secondary education is considered paramount in refugee resettlement policy in the United States and internationally, and it is a high priority for philanthropic organizations.¹¹ In

⁷ Davis, J. H. (2018, September 17). Trump to cap refugees allowed into U.S. at 30,000, a record low. *New York Times*, Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/us/politics/trump-refugees-historic-cuts.html>

⁸ West, S. (2018, July 26). Catholic Charities of Archdiocese of Milwaukee cuts its refugee resettlement program. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Retrieved from <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/milwaukee/2018/07/26/milwaukee-catholic-charities-cuts-its-refugee-resettlement-program/838191002/>

⁹ University of Wisconsin-Extension. (2001). *Wisconsin's Hmong Population: Census 2000 population and other demographic trends*. Applied Population Laboratory and University of Wisconsin-Extension. Gecewicz, C. (2015). *Hmong in Wisconsin: A statistical overview*. Madison, WI: Applied Population Laboratory and University of Wisconsin-Extension.

¹⁰ Wisconsin Department of Children and Families Statistics, The Refugee Assistance Services Program Section. (2016-17). Population & census data. Retrieved from <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/refugee/statistics-population>.

¹¹ Dryden-Peterson, S. (2012). The politics of higher education for refugees in a global movement for primary education. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 27(2).

consequence, far more quality research has been conducted on the educational needs and barriers of refugees in the K12 setting than in the context of higher education.¹²

The lack of inquiry into higher education for refugees may be due in part to an assumption among both scholars and refugee resettlement providers that the socioeconomic barriers faced by refugees are so high, and the need for emergency (food, health, and housing) and basic employment services so great, that college and professional post-graduation employment for adult refugees seems to be an overly optimistic, even utopian goal. It is true that the overwhelming majority of refugees coming to the United States typically require, and sometimes struggle to access, such basic services.¹³ It is also the case, however, that many refugees come to the United States with some college background, and others come with a goal of going to college and manage to achieve that goal despite the obstacles they face. Furthermore, there is evidence that a more robust resettlement and social services support system can facilitate access to higher education.¹⁴

Similar to immigrants coming to the United States generally,¹⁵ refugees face considerable financial obstacles to accessing higher education. Research on the factors that can impact refugee access to higher education in particular include the following key points:

- Refugees can benefit from quality supports to facilitate English language learning, and academic English in particular;¹⁶ female refugees sometimes face additional social barriers to accessing such services.¹⁷
- Refugees struggle to obtain information about how to access higher education, especially in a transnational context; one strategy used by some refugees is to employ social media networks to obtain such information.¹⁸
- Refugees may face problems with discrimination on U.S. college campuses.¹⁹
- Refugees often struggle to obtain official copies of educational documents required to apply for college to continue their education after resettlement.²⁰

¹² Dryden-Peterson, 2012. Ibid. McBrien, J. L. (2005). Educational needs and barriers for refugee students in the United States: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 329-364.

¹³ Rai, K. (2004). Community-based participatory action research: Offering Hmong welfare recipients' voices for dialogue and change. *Immigrants, Welfare Reform, and the Poverty of Policy*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

¹⁴ Research contrasting Southeast Asian and Eastern European refugees access to social services in Chicago found that Eastern Europeans were able to employ the networks from their co-ethnic organizations to access more long-term support—which they utilized to support themselves while accessing higher education and transitioning into middle-class employment—whereas the Southeast Asians faced discrimination and were unable to access the more long-term social services needed to pursue education after resettlement; see Majka, L., & Mullan, B. (2002). Ethnic communities and ethnic organizations reconsidered: South-East Asians and Eastern Europeans in Chicago. *International Migration*, 40(2), 71-92.

¹⁵ Lindsey, K. (2014). Access to education: Challenges and opportunities for immigrant students. *First Focus*. Center for the Children of Immigrants. Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ Curry, M. J. (2001). Adult ESL students in the contact zone: Exploring the effects of multiple educational attainment levels on the community college writing classroom. Presented at the 2001 annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association in Seattle, WA. Hirano, E. (2014). Refugees in first-year college: Academic writing challenges and resources. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 23, 37-52. Boshier, S., & Rowekamp, J. (1998). The refugee/immigrant in higher education: The role of educational background. *College ESL*, 8(1), 23-42.

¹⁷ El-Radi, R. (2015). *The resettlement experiences of Southern Sudanese women refugees in Minnesota* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/187887/ElRadi_umn_0130E_16524.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹⁸ Dahya, N., & Dryden-Peterson, S. (2017). Tracing pathways to higher education for refugees: the role of virtual support networks and mobile phones for women in refugee camps. *Comparative Education*, 53(2), 284-301.

¹⁹ Campbell III, J. A. (2017). Attitudes towards refugee education and its link to xenophobia in the United States. *Intercultural Education*, 28(5), 474-479. Haffeejee, B. (2015). African refugee youths' stories of surviving trauma and transition in US public schools. *Journal of Muslim Mental Health*, 9(1).

²⁰ DiMeo, P., & Somach, S. D. (1996). Bosnian refugee resettlement in the U.S: Part II. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, Refugee Service Center.

Research literature reveals the substantial obstacles to higher education for refugees, but also that resettlement and educational supports can facilitate refugees' higher educational attainment. There is, however, a lack of systematic study of these various barriers and pathways of higher education for refugees, which is the focus of the current study.

Study Methodology

This report presents preliminary findings from an ongoing study that commenced in May 2018. The study involves audio-recorded semi-structured and unstructured interviews with refugee resettlement service providers (N=7) and educators (N=5) to document their work to support refugee resettlement and higher education for refugees in Wisconsin, combined with ethnographic observations of their work with refugees and the collection of relevant documents. Our future research will include more resettlement service providers and educators while also drawing on a sample of refugees with college attainment goals, both those who are currently in college and those who have graduated.

Findings

From our analysis of the interviews, observations, and documents, we identified *policy goals and constraints* and *obstacles and networks* that affect the work of refugee resettlement service providers and educators to facilitate refugee access to higher education. Policy goals and constraints indicated factors dictated by federal, state, and local refugee resettlement policies that impact—and often curtail—service providers' and educators' work to support higher education for refugees. Obstacles and networks indicate barriers that refugees themselves face in accessing and succeeding in higher education, and the social networks that service providers and educators access to help refugees overcome obstacles to higher education.

Policy goals and constraints

The paramount and singular goal of refugee resettlement in the United States is economic “self-sufficiency” as measured by employment. The way the government defines this goal is a major policy constraint on refugee resettlement providers' work to support higher education for refugees. College education for refugees in the United States, as one resettlement provider explained, “[Is] really hard. There are a lot of challenges. So I would say that for adults the reality is, you need to work.” Another service provider explained how this particular definition of the goal of resettlement delimits the possibility of higher education for refugees:

And the goal of resettlement is always, as the government would say, self-sufficiency. So, when people say, “I want to study,” that's not what the expectation of resettlement is. If you get W-2 [Wisconsin's “welfare to work” program] because you have dependent children, that's a 60-month program. The goal is always employment and self-sufficiency. But if you are—if you don't have dependent children, you're under something called Refugee Cash Assistance. That only lasts eight months after you arrive. So, you are expected to get a job as soon as possible and after eight months you—the government is no longer helping you. So, people say, “Well, I want to study,” and it's like you have to say “it's my job to inform you that you have to get a job because the government's only going to help you for a small amount of time until you get a job.” And that sometimes is very demoralizing for people, that they had a lot of hopes and dreams of opportunity here, and the first thing you have to tell them is, “Sorry, the goal of you being here is to get a job first thing. It's not to go to school, it's not to get a degree.”

College takes time—and for refugees who persist towards college, it often takes several years of hard work to even start the process. The language used by refugee resettlement providers reflects this extended time framework. While discussing the “success story” of one Iraqi refugee who was able to learn English, finish high school, and begin at a technical college, his resettlement service provider explained, “It takes time and a lot of work. That family has been here for three or four years now. But he’s doing pretty good now. He just started going to school.”

Yet, refugee resettlement timelines are highly structured and time-delimited, with many and various meetings, applications, and procedures that must be completed within the first 90 days after resettlement. After this, refugees’ transition to public service programs which diminish over time and are often contingent upon the refugee pursuing fulltime employment. Such benefits end upon employment and the determination of self-sufficiency. In this resettlement framework, “success” is characterized by the speed in which refugees transition off of social services, “you are expected to get a job as soon as possible,” “to get a job first thing,” which prohibits serious consideration of higher education for refugees.

While resettlement service providers and educators work hard to support the college attainment of refugees in our communities, we are finding that the narrowly defined goal of refugee resettlement as “self-sufficiency” and the highly structured and time-delimited framework of resettlement effectively thwart and complicate this process. Shortly after a refugee’s arrival to the United States, resettlement service providers meet with the client to formulate a Service Plan, which is often the first opportunity for refugees to discuss their educational goals. As explained by a resettlement service provider:

[W]hat the Service Plan does is really evaluate, you know, their experience overseas, their educational background, their experience, you know, what they did, things like that. And based on that, we kind of have an idea what kinds of interest do they have, what do they want to do, what are their goals. And it kind of maps out what it’s going to be for the next three months, for the next six months, and maybe beyond.

As described by one resettlement service provider, one way to manage a disclosure of college attainment goals is to re-direct toward work, which is policy imperative of U.S. Resettlement Program. Thus, it is necessary to explain to the refugee, “Sorry, the goal of you being here is to get a job first thing. It’s not to go to school, it’s not to get a degree.” Another resettlement provider described how the focus of rapid employment discourages consideration of higher education: “[W]e never talked about education [with refugees], you know, furthering their education. It was, okay, you’ve got to get a job because you have to support your family.”

Refugee resettlement providers sometimes work with refugees to manage their higher education goals in the context of the policy goals and constraints of the refugee resettlement policy regime by “break[ing] it down into manageable chunks.” This process involves segmenting an educational goal—for example, studying to become a doctor or nurse, an accountant, a teacher, an engineer—into short-term, college-oriented goals. Such goals may include learning more English skills, obtaining a high school equivalency diploma, and meeting employment goals such as trying “to set manageable goals of starting a job, then maintaining a job, then taking on more responsibility.” If, after a year or two, the refugee has met these goals, the service provider revisits the discussion of pursuing college, often first at a community college but perhaps later at a university.

Another strategy that resettlement providers employ with refugees with college goals is to provide them with information to encourage them to modify their goals of going to college. One service provider explains this strategy:

Now, another young woman who is working on her high school equivalency has a little bit higher level of English but still could be better, she said that she wants to be a doctor. And so I said, “just so you know, being a doctor involves, you know—after you complete your high school, then you do four years of undergraduate, four years of graduate school, and then four years of residency. And during that time you’re going to have to pay and work pretty insane hours, like at least during the residency, right.” So, she wasn’t really aware of that. But then we were—you know, we always put it back to the client. We try give them the information they need to make their own decision. So I wasn’t doing that to talk her out of it but make sure she understood that that’s what being a doctor means here. But then, you know, someone suggested maybe she can look at physician’s assistant, which is similar. You’re going to be doing similar work and it’s not as long a commitment.

Lastly, as a refugee’s resettlement benefits and social services decline, resettlement providers sometimes present advice to refugees with college goals about “budgeting” and “time management,” to develop a strategy to manage work and school simultaneously in the context of diminishing basic support services for themselves and their family:

I mean part of the advice is they come and say, “oh we don’t have money, my FoodShare is coming down, I want to go to school, please look for a part time job.” So I would say, OK, you go to school, we’ll look for an evening job for you. You go to school, we’ll look for a weekend job for you. I mean you don’t need to leave school to work fulltime and then I readjust their budget again. I think there are unnecessary expenses like Internet or a phone or just buying unnecessary stuff that they don’t need.

The goals of refugee resettlement, which is narrowly focused on employment and “self-sufficiency” and the short-term and time delimited nature of the supports provided to refugees, effectively thwart and discourage refugees with college goals. The two primary consequences of such policy constraints are to discourage higher education for refugees and to direct them towards rapid employment after resettlement.

Obstacles and networks

Because of the emphasis on “self-sufficient” employment in the refugee resettlement process, resettlement providers are not trained or well-equipped to support higher education for refugees. As one service provider explained, “We would love to be having study groups here, but we can’t do that.” Refugee resettlement providers who work as employment specialists, for example, receive no training in precollege advising, but they effectively become precollege advisors in their efforts to help their clients with their educational goals. They also support refugees’ educational goals by accessing or referring their clients to community and educational networks that can ...

help them become independent by being able to access information in the community.... It’s like I’m not an expert, let me show you where you can get the information, talk to an academic advisor, connect them to the community college, connect them to, you know, different places so they can talk to the people.

This section briefly describes the recurrent major obstacles that frustrate refugees’ access to higher education, and the social and institutional networks that refugee resettlement providers access in order to support higher education for refugees. These obstacles include poverty, struggles with learning academic English, a lack of required “official copies” of educational documents, and challenges associated with cultural differences in educational settings.

Refugee resettlement service providers consider the coupling of poverty and struggles with learning enough English to pursue their employment and educational goals as a primary and defining struggle of the refugee experience in the United States. And they also consider that coupling as the primary pair obstacles of higher education for refugees. As one service provider explained, “I think it all just comes down to the barriers of generally being a non-English speaker immigrant and also being poor.” The provider further explained that “refugees are in the center of that venn diagram between generally low income and immigrants. So that’s where they fall. So they have all the challenges that a non-native American might have, especially with English.” All refugee resettlement service providers and educators included in this study described struggles that refugees face with poverty and with learning English.

As described in the previous section of this report, refugee resettlement service providers coordinate with county and state programs, as well as local community resources, to facilitate rapid employment and “self-sufficiency.” In addition to rapid employment, service providers prioritize English language learning (ELL) goals for their clients, enrolling them in classes offered at community colleges, literacy networks, or in the public schools. One ELL educator described their work with refugees to teach English focused on practical language skills needed to access community resources, including information and resources needed to access higher education. The community college has a “bridge program” that facilitates ELL students’ transition into Associates Degree programs at community colleges, including programs such as Administrative Professional, Biotechnology, Pre-Health, and Culinary Arts.

According to educators who work with refugees, another obstacle faced by refugees is that colleges and universities in the United States require “official copies” of transcripts and other educational documents in applications for admission. Often, refugees lack the needed official documentation to support such applications. Furthermore, on occasion, colleges in the country of origin may be destroyed or not recognized by the local government’s higher education accrediting agency. Refugee resettlement providers refer such cases to private credentialing specialists, who review the available documentation and produce a report that identifies credentials and credits that may be recognized by enrollment officers as equivalent. In some cases, credentialing specialists work with refugees and their former international educational institutions to attempt to obtain missing documentation. Often, however, this is impossible. In such cases, they can employ what one credentialing specialist described as “a narrative approach.” This involves describing the educational background of the refugee as best as possible, to try to fill in the gaps left by missing or unofficial documents, to narrate a more holistic picture of the refugee’s education.

Ultimately, the decision to recognize a refugee’s credentials and course equivalences is in the hands of the enrollment officers of the particular institution, who may often not recognize the courses as equivalent or rule the application as “incomplete” because of the unofficial status of the transcripts. One refugee recently had his bachelor’s degree in social work recognized by a University of Wisconsin System University and was able start a Master’s degree in Social Work. As his resettlement service provider explained, “Sometimes we get lucky like that. His education was recognized, but that is not often the case.” Refugee resettlement providers facilitate this process by referring refugees to credentialing specialists with training and experience in this “narrative approach,” and by cultivating relationships with faculty, advisors, and administration at local community colleges—who have a track record being more “flexible” than their colleagues in public and private universities in the state with accepting problematic transcripts. In cases where high school transcripts are not recognized by the college, resettlement services providers enroll refugees in high school equivalency courses in the public schools or at the community colleges.

Other obstacles refugees face in accessing higher education are the cultural differences in schooling between the United States and the settings of their prior educational experiences, combined with the lack of institutional knowledge about higher education in the United States. The adjustment to such cultural differences can be bewildering for new refugees; as one service provider explained,

I think it depends on how educated the people are when they arrive. You know, how much adjustment they have. You know, for some, it's just, it's such a huge adjustment just to be here and start life here, to think about going to college or going to the technical college or doing, adding anything to your plate, I think it's, you know, unrealistic.

Service providers provide extensive “cultural orientation” during the first three months after resettlement, on basic topics such as how to navigate public transportation, access health care, and ways to get education for themselves and their children. Service providers also refer refugees to precollege advisors in the public schools, ELL and high school equivalency instructors in the public schools and community colleges, and community college academic advisors, and enrollment and financial aid staff.

Implications

There is a lack of quality research on the obstacles and pathways to higher education for refugees, in part because both scholars and practitioners tend to believe that the obstacles to higher education success for adult refugees are so difficult to overcome that such goals are unrealistic. However, the available research literature indicates that although there are considerable obstacles to higher education for refugees, quality social and educational supports can facilitate college attainment, especially over the long term.

Our research indicates that refugee resettlement policy focuses too narrowly on “self-sufficiency” through rapid employment as the goal of resettlement. Furthermore, the time delimited and diminishing nature of resettlement and social services effectively thwarts and complicates the work to support higher education for refugees. The outcome measures of refugee resettlement need to be expanded to include higher education as a potential outcome, and funding for educational supports for college-oriented adult refugees can strengthen the pathway towards middle-class and professional employment.

Given the extended timeframe and nonlinear path to college attainment for refugees, resettlement service providers and educators would benefit from efforts to track refugees over more extended time frames, to document the positive outcomes of higher education for refugees. We plan more research on how refugees experience and manage the obstacles and pathways towards college success. This research will next focus on documenting the process of higher education for the refugees themselves.



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The mission of The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) is to conduct and support research, critical policy analysis, and public dialogue on student experiences with the transition from college to the workforce in order to inform policies, programs, and practices that promote academic and career success for all learners.

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