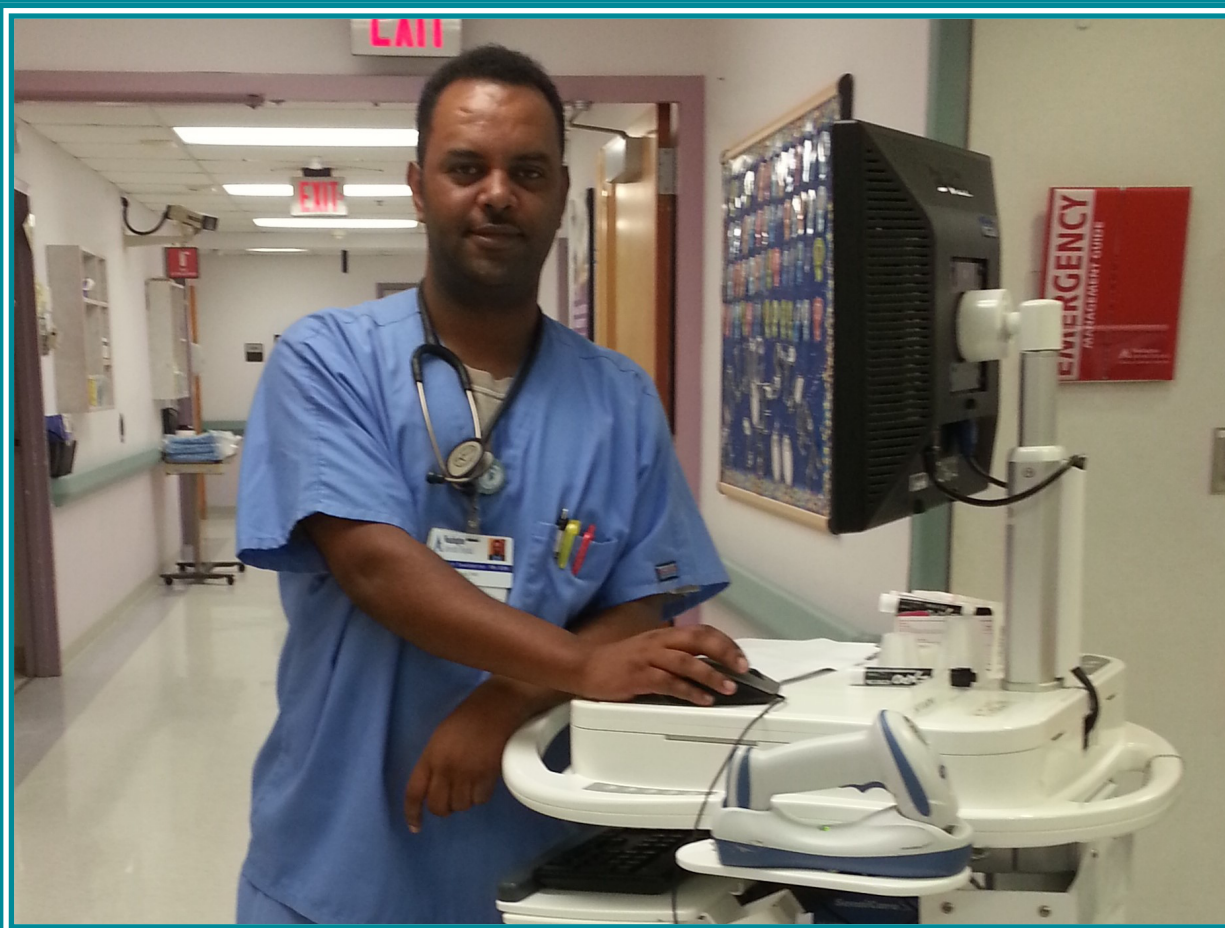


UNLOCKING SKILLS

Successful Initiatives for Integrating Foreign-Trained Immigrant Professionals



Out of Many, One: A Series on Innovative Initiatives that Promote the Successful Integration of U.S. Immigrants and Refugees

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Successful Initiatives for Integrating Foreign-Trained Immigrant Professionals

By Margie McHugh and Madeleine Morawski

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Executive Summary

Nearly 2 million college-educated immigrants and refugees in the United States are not working in middle- or high-skill jobs despite possessing years—sometimes decades—of education and work experience. More than half of these immigrants earned their college degrees abroad, coming to the United States with academic credentials and in some cases significant professional experience. They include civil engineers who supported the work of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, teachers whose education and status made them targets of violence and repression in their home countries, nurses and doctors immigrating to join relatives in the United States, and tens of thousands of others with advanced degrees and training in a wide range of professions. Rather than working in the field for which they were trained, they fill lower-skilled and, all too often, low-wage jobs that may allow them to support their families at some level, but that provide few opportunities for professional or economic advancement.

Nationwide, one-quarter of all highly skilled immigrants suffer from “brain waste”—meaning they are either unemployed or underemployed—compared to just 18 percent of the native born. This brain waste is particularly acute for those who earned their college degrees abroad: 29 percent of these highly skilled immigrants were unemployed or underemployed, compared to 21 percent of foreign-born college graduates who gained their degrees in the United States. Recent Migration Policy Institute (MPI) research found that forgone annual earnings among underemployed college-educated immigrants amounted to \$39 billion nationally, leading to approximately \$10 billion in unrealized tax revenues. This skill underutilization is rooted in a range of challenges that face immigrants seeking to enter the skilled workforce after arriving in the United States—including navigating complex licensing requirements, demonstrating that foreign credentials meet U.S. standards, filling gaps in their education or training, and building professional networks.

Brain waste is particularly acute for those who earned their college degrees abroad.

Drawing examples from among top finishers in MPI’s E Pluribus Unum Prize competition for exceptional immigrant integration initiatives, this report explores a range of frontline programs and high-level policy reform efforts that are working to reduce this waste of skills and economic potential. These initiatives have created cutting-edge career navigation, relicensing, gap filling, work experience, and job search programs for a wide range of occupations as well as different state policy and licensing contexts.

The lessons learned from these efforts are useful not only to state and local actors seeking to leverage the skills of highly trained immigrants, but also to the growing number of policymakers aware of and seeking to end the damage done by unnecessarily rigid state occupation licensing laws. In recent years, for example, increased attention has focused on similar relicensing burdens facing the spouses of highly mobile active-duty military members and on veterans struggling to transition into the civilian workforce and receive recognition for training and skills developed in the military. Licensing bodies are also facing heightened scrutiny in the wake of a 2015 Supreme Court decision that found certain regulations and enforcement practices unfairly stifle competition.

With new momentum driving efforts to examine the dizzying array of state occupational regulations, determine where they reach beyond their consumer-protection purposes, and design targeted supports to help well-trained individuals meet legitimate requirements, successful efforts offer important insights for the ongoing push for reform. The initiatives discussed in this report demonstrate effective approaches for those in frontline service organizations that work directly with highly trained individuals seeking to rejoin or advance in their field. The report also provides lessons from policy and system change efforts for



those seeking to untangle and reform the dense thicket of state laws and regulations that slow or prevent qualified individuals from practicing a wide range of occupations.

The report identifies the following stubborn challenges facing those seeking to end brain waste as well as a set of opportunities and tools for doing so:

1) Review and reform state licensing laws that impose unnecessary and undue requirements on foreign-trained immigrants. While regulating professional standards and licensing is unquestionably important for protecting consumers' health and safety, the public good is not served when licensing requirements over-reach and leave no tenable path for well-trained immigrant professionals—among them doctors, nurses, dentists, engineers, social workers, and teachers—to re-enter their field. Though time-intensive and requiring considerable political will, efforts by states to re-examine and update their licensing processes hold great potential to reduce skill underutilization among foreign-trained workers and other mobile professionals.

2) Increase advanced English language and bridge programming to help internationally educated immigrants top-off their skills and become licensed in the United States. In addition to the expert information and career navigation supports successful programs provide, effective service designs also emphasize assisting highly educated immigrants in building professional-level English skills and filling gaps in coursework or practical training. However, these services models often fit poorly within typical adult education and workforce training systems since they focus on individualized and industry-specific learning needs, rather than following a standard course of study and offering training to a large number of students. Given the high level of assistance provided to refugees immediately after resettlement and the provisions in refugee law that encourage recredentialing support, the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement is well-positioned to expand and review the effectiveness of bridge programming models for a range of professions and state regulatory contexts. Diverse stakeholders could also contribute to advances in the use of technology to meet the demand for professional-level English instruction. Such efforts need not reinvent the wheel; new free or low-cost options may built upon successful distance learning supports that already exist in states such as California.

3) Expand evaluation of programs that support effective labor-market integration of high-skilled immigrants and refugees, and analysis of the elements of adult education and workforce training systems that contribute to their success. While adults with limited English proficiency have traditionally found it almost impossible to access federal workforce training programs, the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA), which governs federally funded workforce development and adult education services, is expected to result in more support for programs that offer integrated English and skills training. Highly educated immigrants should be prime candidates for such programs, since tough accountability measures in the law penalize programs (and states) if after exiting services participants are not employed and working in well-paid jobs. Yet, the nontraditional design of effective service models for highly educated immigrants, which often entail an extended or flexible program timeline and services tailored to individual needs, are a poor fit for conventional funding approaches that require service providers to demonstrate client progress toward standardized outcomes within a year—a mismatch that will likely constrain service expansion in many areas. These unfolding dynamics provide a unique opportunity to study and improve understanding both of effective program designs for immigrants seeking to rejoin their professions, as well as of elements in state and local planning, contracting, and accountability designs that contribute to the selection and success of such programs. Given the purview of the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education over major national programs, these agencies appear best positioned to conduct such a review.

4) Increase monitoring and technical assistance to address employer bias. Even after successfully navigating the arduous recredentialing process, foreign-trained immigrants often find their progress blocked by employer bias. This occurs, for example, when those making hiring decisions arbitrarily discount the value of degrees or training obtained abroad, unlawfully require U.S. citizenship as a condition of employment, or downgrade job candidates for speaking accented English. Employers should



review their application and hiring processes to identify and adjust elements that may reflect implicit or explicit bias. Steps should also be taken to ensure that everyone involved in the organization's hiring decisions have the training and support needed to fairly assess the value of credentials attained abroad. Antidiscrimination provisions and training for human resources staff should also be reviewed to ensure they appropriately address potential sources of bias against foreign-born and foreign-trained individuals.

5) Expand reciprocity and mutual recognition agreements, and support efforts to harmonize qualifications across countries, states, licensing boards, accreditation bodies, and educational institutions. Mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) are a powerful way to address education and qualification recognition barriers at their source. When established between countries, however, they are usually only signed after the underlying standards used by each country's educational institutions and licensing authorities are harmonized. With many major actors pushing mutual recognition efforts forward—including the European Union, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and engineering regulators in more than a dozen countries—opportunities abound for education institutions, state and federal officials, and other stakeholders to support and learn from existing efforts to diminish brain waste.

The initiatives described in this report have pioneered successful strategies to assist immigrant professionals in understanding state occupational regulations, filling knowledge and experience gaps when necessary, and re-entering employment in the field for which they were trained. However, the dispersed nature of licensing authorities and the protectionist tendencies of professional associations leave much work to be done in evaluating and updating poorly designed and unnecessarily rigid regulations that hinder foreign-trained professionals' advancement in the workforce. As awareness grows of the adverse effects over-reaching and inflexible occupational regulations have on other impacted groups, such as veterans and military spouses, the lessons learned from the innovative program and policy reform initiatives featured in this report will prove indispensable both within and beyond the immigrant integration field.

I. Introduction

Of the 7.6 million college-educated immigrants for whom the United States is home, 1.9 million are unemployed or underemployed in low-skill jobs.¹ More than half of these immigrants were educated abroad, but instead of contributing their skills and experience to high-demand fields, such as health care and education, they remain stuck in low-paid survival jobs that diminish their ability to support their families and contribute to local economies. Some skilled immigrants may never re-enter the profession for which they were trained, while others may resort to repeating their entire course of study at a U.S. institution.

Helping foreign-trained immigrants access skilled employment can increase consumer spending and tax revenues, improve the integration of immigrants into receiving communities, and free up jobs for low-skilled workers. Yet complex and bureaucratic professional licensing requirements, scarce opportunities to fill gaps in education and work experience, and the cost and time associated with relicensing frequently prevent immigrants educated abroad from securing skilled employment. Solutions that aim to remedy this waste of human capital can take a variety of forms: from increasing opportunities to attain professional-level English language and literacy skills to removing unnecessary licensing barriers.

1 Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and James D. Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy, and World Education Services, 2016), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states.



Through the E Pluribus Unum Prize competition, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) has recognized exceptional initiatives that promote the integration of immigrants in the United States.² By drawing on examples from competition finalists, this report explores and provides lessons from a range of programs that help foreign-trained immigrants and refugees overcome obstacles that would prevent them from obtaining jobs commensurate with their skills. The report also examines recent policy developments affecting the integration of highly skilled immigrants, and offers recommendations to improve programs and policies that support foreign professionals' re-entry into the skilled workforce.

II. Challenges Facing Foreign-Trained Immigrants

Foreign-trained immigrants face a wide array of barriers when seeking skilled work in the United States on the basis of advanced education and training completed abroad. Many of these challenges require significant time and financial resources to address—for example, building professional-level English language skills; navigating licensing requirements that are frequently complex, restrictive, lengthy, and expensive; and, in some cases, repeating all or some of their training at a U.S. institution, regardless of the level of their qualifications.

For many of these individuals, these barriers mean weighing the immediate need to find work to support themselves and family members against the longer-term benefits of expending resources to rebuild their careers in the United States. In order to do the latter, they must have the means to finance the additional education, training, and licensing procedures involved in re-entering their profession, and they must be able to afford the time away from work—which can be months, or even years—needed to complete the steps required.

*These barriers mean weighing the immediate need to find work
... against the longer-term benefits of expending resources to
rebuild their careers in the United States.*

Beyond the qualifications particular to each field, high-skilled immigrants must also learn to market themselves effectively to prospective employers without the benefit of extensive professional networks or lengthy employment histories in the United States. When these many challenges prove too difficult to overcome, they result in “brain waste”—the unemployment or underemployment of highly educated individuals in jobs that fail to make use of their postsecondary education and work experience (see Box 1). Recent MPI research into the extent and impact of skill underutilization in the United States found that one-quarter of all highly skilled immigrants suffer from brain waste nationwide, compared to just 18 percent of the native born.³ The problem is particularly acute for those who obtained their college degrees abroad: 29 percent of these highly skilled immigrants experience brain waste, compared to 21 percent of the foreign born who earned college degrees in the United States. Overall, MPI estimates that the forgone annual earnings among underemployed college-educated immigrants amounted to \$39 billion nationally, and a resulting \$10 billion in unrealized tax revenues.

2 For information on this competition, see Migration Policy Institute (MPI), “E Pluribus Unum Prizes,” accessed February 22, 2017, www.integrationawards.org.

3 Batalova, Fix, and Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent*.



Box I. What Is Brain Waste?

Brain waste occurs when college graduates cannot fully utilize their skills and education in the workplace despite their professional qualifications. This report uses the terms *college-educated immigrant*, *highly skilled immigrant*, *foreign-educated immigrant*, and *internationally educated immigrant* interchangeably.

This report defines brain waste (or skill underutilization) as comprising two unfavorable labor-market outcomes: unemployment and underemployment.

- *Unemployment* occurs when a person who is actively searching for employment is unable to find work.
- *Underemployment* refers to work by the highly skilled in low-skilled jobs, that is, jobs that require only moderate on-the-job training or less (e.g., home-health aides, personal-care aides, maids and housekeepers, taxi and truck drivers, and cashiers). These occupations typically require a high school diploma or less.

In contrast, highly skilled individuals who are adequately employed are working in high- or middle-skilled jobs. *High-skilled* jobs require at least a bachelor's degree (e.g., postsecondary teachers, surgeons, scientists, and engineers); *middle-skilled* jobs require long-term on-the-job training, vocational training, or an associate's degree (e.g., carpenters, electricians, massage therapists, and real estate brokers).

Source: Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and James D. Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy, and World Education Services, 2016), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states.

A. Meeting Licensing Requirements

For foreign-trained immigrants seeking to practice in regulated fields such as health care, teaching, and engineering, simply understanding the complexities of the licensing process and available career paths can present a significant obstacle. In the United States, the majority of these professions are regulated at the state level, meaning that policies can differ substantially from state to state. Job titles and responsibilities, as delineated in the United States, may also not correspond to those in immigrants' countries of origin.⁴ These differences, coupled with the challenge of navigating government licensing resources and applications in English, can discourage potential licensees from applying or lead to missteps that cost valuable time and money.

Licensing regulations themselves also pose significant, and sometimes unnecessary, barriers. In order to become licensed, foreign-trained candidates generally have to pass licensing exams and submit third-party evaluations of their education credentials. Often, they must also meet English proficiency or practical experience requirements. For immigrants who have been practicing and out of school for many years, passing tests such as the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) for nurses or the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) for physicians can present a significant barrier.

⁴ Madeleine Sumption, *Tackling Brain Waste: Strategies to Improve the Recognition of Immigrants' Foreign Qualifications* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2013), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/tackling-brain-waste-strategies-improve-recognition-immigrants-foreign-qualifications.



While such testing may be necessary to ensure that internationally trained professionals meet U.S. standards, other requirements are less clearly essential to job performance. For example, until recently, a number of states (including Illinois and Washington State) required a passing score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) from foreign-trained nurses seeking a Registered Nurse (RN) license. Critics of the requirement argued that the academic nature of the TOEFL exam made it an ill-suited measure of the English skills required to communicate with patients and created an unnecessarily high barrier to entry into the profession.⁵ Other regulated professions that frequently require licensure applicants to pass the TOEFL include pharmacy, physical therapy, and engineering (in some states).⁶

Opportunities for immigrants to obtain career guidance or assistance in understanding licensing requirements are limited. Typical sources of job assistance, such as federally funded One-Stop Workforce Centers or refugee resettlement agencies, focus almost exclusively on achieving immediate employment rather than working towards clients' long-term career goals.⁷ These survival jobs rarely provide family-sustaining wages and may trap skilled immigrants in low-paid positions indefinitely rather than putting them on a path toward skilled employment and higher wages.

B. Filling Gaps in Education and Training

In general, the first step for immigrants seeking to become licensed or demonstrate their qualifications to potential employers is to obtain an assessment of their education and training credentials. Conducted by private or nonprofit agencies, this process generally involves an evaluation of the coursework completed as part of a foreign degree program in order to determine its U.S. equivalent.⁸ The credential assessment process can be lengthy and costly, and presents a particular challenge for immigrants and refugees who have trouble providing documentation of their credentials due to conditions in their countries of origin, such as ongoing conflict or natural disaster.⁹

If gaps are found between an applicant's education or coursework and the requirements for a particular degree in the United States, foreign-trained individuals must find a way to complete supplementary coursework to fill such gaps. Depending on the field and the missing coursework, this can prove impossible, since stand-alone courses that cover the material needed are often not available to students outside a degree program. For example, internationally trained nurses sometimes lack course credit in pediatric nursing; yet courses in pediatric nursing are often only available to students pursuing a full

5 Vy Nguyen, Roxana Norouzi, and Nicholas V. Montalto, *Reducing Brain Waste: Creating Career Pathways for Foreign-Educated Immigrants in Washington State* (Seattle: OneAmerica, 2015), www.weareoneamerica.org/sites/weareoneamerica.org/files/OA.BrainWaste.final_.pdf.

6 National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, "The FPGEC certification Program," accessed February 8, 2017, <https://nabp.pharmacy/programs/fpgec/>; Foreign Credentialing Commission on Physical Therapy (FCCPT), "Comprehensive Credentials Review (Type 1 Review)," accessed January 25, 2017, <http://fccpt.org/Getting-Started/Primary-Services/Type-1-Review/>; Illinois General Assembly, "Professions, Occupations, and Business Operations (225 ILCS 325/) Professional Engineering Practice Act Of 1989," Illinois Compiled Statutes, accessed January 27, 2017, www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs3.asp?ActID=1344&ChapterID=24.

7 See, for example, Ed Strong, "One-Stop Career Centers Must be Re-Invented to Meet Today's Labor Market Realities" (working paper, Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, Ann Arbor, MI, March 2012), <http://skilledwork.org/publications/one-stop-career-centers-must-be-reinvented-to-meet-todays-labor-market-realities/>; U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2012), www.gao.gov/assets/600/592975.pdf.

8 See, for example, Sumption, *Tackling Brain Waste*; Global Talent Bridge, *A Toolkit for ESL Practitioners Supporting Skilled Immigrants* (New York: World Education Services, 2011), www.globaltalentbridge.org/toolkit/pdf/SupportingSkilledImmigrantsToolkit.pdf.

9 Linda Rabben, *Credential Recognition in the United States for Foreign Professionals* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2013), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/credential-recognition-united-states-foreign-professionals.



nursing degree from an academic institution.¹⁰ In the worst-case scenario, a skilled immigrant missing a single course may have no option other than to repeat an entire course of study or degree program before applying to become licensed or re-entering their field.

Accessing hands-on training in the United States can prove even more difficult than filling gaps in academic coursework. For professions that require or encourage practical training or supervised work experience—as is the case in many medical professions—foreign-trained immigrants are often at a severe disadvantage since opportunities to complete supervised training are often available only to current students.¹¹ For example, physician residency programs frequently require or prefer U.S. clinical experience, but few institutions allow internationally trained physicians to participate in clinical training if they are not currently enrolled in a medical school or already participating in a residency.¹²

*A skilled immigrant missing a single course may have no option
other than to repeat an entire course of study.*

In many cases, limited time and financial resources prevent skilled immigrants from investing in long-term career goals. Simply registering to take the requisite licensure exams can cost hundreds of dollars, and exam preparation courses command similarly high fees.¹³ Immigrants and refugees who need to complete additional coursework to fill gaps in formal qualifications must bear not only the cost of enrolling in an education or training program, but also the wages lost when spending time in class rather than at work. For those who attempt to fill credential gaps while maintaining a low-paying survival job, the difficulty of balancing work and study can mean slow progress, poor exam results, and increased likelihood of dropping out.

C. Limited English Proficiency

Another common challenge is the professional—and often technical—level of English required for success in many occupations. Even immigrants with advanced levels of English proficiency may not be equipped with the technical vocabulary necessary to practice professionally or pass licensing examinations. While some English classes attempt to integrate language learning with industry-specific vocabulary and exercises—often called contextualized English instruction—such programs are highly specific, require in-person attendance, and as a result tend to be limited in scale if they exist at all.

Federal- and state-funded English language courses enroll large numbers of college-educated immigrants, though these classes are generally not advanced or technical enough to meet the needs of highly skilled individuals hoping to develop professional-level English. According to data captured

10 Puget Sound Welcome Back Center, “Washington State Healthcare Licensing Requirements: Internationally Trained Registered Nurse (IEN)” (unpublished checklist, Puget Sound Welcome Back Center, Des Moines, WA, February 2015).

11 In California, for example, international medical graduates are prohibited from gaining clinical experience beyond routine medical assistant duties unless they are enrolled in a training program approved by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education or they already possess a California medical license. See Medical Board of California, “Warning to Physicians and Program Directors: Don’t Assist the Unlicensed Practice of Medicine,” *Medical Board of California Newsletter* 115 (2010): 5, www.mbc.ca.gov/publications/newsletters/newsletter_2010_07.pdf.

12 Minnesota Department of Health, *Task Force on Foreign-Trained Physicians: Report to the Minnesota Legislature* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Department of Health, Division of Health Policy, 2015), www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/workforce/iimg/finalrpt.pdf.

13 See, for example, National Council of State Boards of Nursing, “Fees & Payment,” accessed June 10, 2016, www.ncsbn.org/1203.htm; National Board of Medical Examiners, “USMLE Examination Fees,” accessed June 10, 2016, www.nbme.org/students/examfees.html; Kaplan Nursing, “NCLEX-RN Prep Options,” accessed June 10, 2016, www.kaptest.com/nursing/nclex-prep/nclex-rn/course-options.



by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Reporting System, the database through which adult education programs track enrollment and outcomes, nearly 86,000 participants in the 2014 program year had completed a college or professional degree outside the United States, representing 6 percent of all program participants.¹⁴ However, federally funded programs typically only offer English courses through the “advanced” level, which is described as the ability to “understand the main points of simple discussions and informational communication in familiar contexts” and “handle work demands that require non-technical oral and written instructions and routine interaction with the public.”¹⁵ This level of English proficiency is not sufficient for individuals seeking to pass academic proficiency tests, such as the TOEFL, or develop technical vocabulary to work in a specialized field.

D. Developing Soft Skills and Social Capital

Beyond taking the steps needed to demonstrate—and fill gaps in—international education and work experience, foreign-trained immigrants may also need to master the “soft skills” necessary to obtain skilled employment in the United States. This includes learning job search and interview skills, and strengthening their understanding of U.S. workplace norms and expectations. For example, in job markets outside the United States, resumes often include a photo, marital status, or other information considered inappropriate on a U.S. resume. Applicants may also be unfamiliar with the competitive interview processed used by most U.S. employers.¹⁶

Foreign-trained immigrants also typically lack social capital in the United States, notably in the form of professional networks that can help identify employment opportunities, serve as references, or provide mentorship. A 2015 study conducted by Immigrant Professional Integration (IMPRINT), a national coalition of organizations focused on skilled immigrant integration, explored the experiences of immigrant professionals in six cities and found that social capital was strongly correlated with immigrants’ economic and professional success.¹⁷ These findings suggest that a lack of professional connections may present a significant obstacle for foreign-trained immigrants and refugees seeking to enter the professional workforce in the United States.

E. Overcoming Employer Bias

Immigrant jobseekers must also overcome the tendency of some employers to discount foreign work experience or qualifications, particularly those that are difficult to understand or evaluate. Even in professions that do not require licensure, the preference for U.S. work experience often leads high-skilled immigrants to seek entry level positions, regardless of the extent of their experience practicing abroad. In fact, the 2015 IMPRINT study found that the most common barrier to skilled employment cited by foreign-trained immigrants was their lack of U.S. work experience. This is often referred to as a catch-22—employers prefer candidates with U.S. work experience, but immigrants cannot gain such experience without first securing employment in the United States. On top of this, some foreign-trained immigrants also report having trouble accessing entry-level jobs because they are perceived as overqualified.¹⁸

14 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, National Reporting System, “Document Section: Reports—Reports of Aggregate NRS Tables—Participant Status and Program Enrollment: All Regions, Program Year 2014,” accessed January 31, 2017, <https://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/login.cfm>.

15 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, National Reporting System, *Implementation Guidelines: Measures and Methods for the National Reporting System for Adult Education* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2016), www.nrsweb.org/docs/NRS_Implementation_Guidelines_February2016.pdf.

16 Author communication with Nikki Cicerani, President and CEO of Upwardly Global, by email, January 13, 2017.

17 Amanda Bergson-Shilcock and James Witte, *Steps to Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals in the U.S.* (New York: World Education Services, 2015), www.imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess/.

18 Author communication with Nikki Cicerani.



Skilled immigrants are frequently encouraged to find other ways to add U.S. experience to their resumes, such as through internships or volunteer work. However, internships are often targeted to younger individuals and are frequently low- or unpaid, putting them out of reach for immigrants and refugees who must support families as they work towards re-entering their field. Volunteering presents similar obstacles for those who cannot afford to work without pay.

Internships are ... frequently low- or unpaid, putting them out of reach for immigrants and refugees who must support families.

IMPRINT found that nearly 40 percent of respondents reported that failure by an employer to recognize foreign work experience was a barrier to employment, while 35 percent identified failure to recognize foreign credentials as a barrier. Furthermore, 20 percent reported facing discrimination based on their “gender, race, ethnicity or other factors.”¹⁹ Notably, respondents from Africa were most likely to report encountering each of these barriers, followed by those from Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁰ Research in the Canadian context has also demonstrated a tendency by employers to value foreign education and experience less, and that employers are particularly likely to evaluate “visible minority” candidates less favorably should uncertainty arise about an individual’s skills or qualifications.²¹ In one Canadian study, researchers sent otherwise identical resumes in response to online job postings but with the candidate’s name changed to sound either English, Indian, or Chinese; those with English-sounding names were 35 percent more likely to be called back for interviews than those with foreign-sounding names.²²

Bias may also be present even before an employer receives and evaluates job applications. Some postings specify that applicants must be a U.S. citizen—which, depending on the nature of the position, may violate antidiscrimination laws²³—and online application systems are often ill-equipped to handle foreign credentials. For example, drop-down menus may not list foreign degrees or institutions, and forms may otherwise assume a one-size-fits-all approach that inadvertently screens out applicants with international education and work experience.²⁴

III. Innovative Solutions to Overcome Labor-Market Barriers

Despite the myriad barriers that foreign-trained immigrants and refugees face in the United States, organizations across the country have developed successful models for mitigating these challenges. The focus of these initiatives range from disseminating much-needed information, providing career guidance,

19 Bergson-Shilcock and Witte, *Steps to Success*, 59.

20 Ibid.

21 Victoria M. Esses, Joerg Dietz, Caroline Bennett-Abuayyash, and Chetan Joshi, “Prejudice in the Workplace: The Role of Bias Against Visible Minorities in the Devaluation of Immigrants’ Foreign-Acquired Qualifications and Credentials,” *Canadian Issues* (Spring 2007): 114–118, www.unitar.org/ny/sites/unitar.org.ny/files/foreign%20credentials.pdf.

22 Diane Dechief and Philip Oreopoulos, “Why Do Some Employers Prefer to Interview Matthew but Not Samir? New Evidence from Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver” (working paper no. 95, Canadian Labour Market and Skills Researcher Network, Vancouver, 2012), www.clsrn.econ.ubc.ca/workingpapers/CLSRN%20Working%20Paper%20no.%2095%20-%20Dechief%20and%20Oreopoulos.pdf.

23 Workplace Fairness, “Immigration Status Discrimination,” accessed January 19, 2017, www.workplacefairness.org/immigration-status.

24 Author communication with Nikki Cicerani.



and helping foreign-trained professionals fill gaps in education and training gained abroad, to offering opportunities to build soft skills. Such strategies have proved highly effective in helping foreign-trained professionals access skilled employment in the United States.

A. *Tailored Information and Licensing Guides*

Due to the complexity of licensing requirements and their variation across states, understanding licensing procedures presents a significant challenge for internationally trained professionals. Even when information specific to foreign-educated applicants is readily available from professional associations or regulatory bodies, these resources rarely describe the unique hurdles that foreign-trained immigrants may encounter or provide tools to help applicants accurately estimate the time and financial resources necessary to complete the licensure process.

Upwardly Global—an E Pluribus Unum Prize winner that serves foreign-educated immigrants directly in four cities, via partnerships in another three, and nationally through online resources—has developed a set of widely acclaimed professional licensing guides that provide skilled immigrants with a roadmap for understanding their relicensing options. Currently available for 13 professions across five states, the guides provide basic explanations of how each profession is organized as well as the eligibility criteria for licensure, required credential evaluations and examinations, estimates of the time and costs associated with the licensure process, and alternate careers for those who cannot or do not wish to relicense.²⁵ Step-by-step estimates of time and cost represent a particularly valuable resource, as they help identify the potential setbacks immigrant professionals may encounter and quantify the time and cost associated with each. Armed with such information, individuals seeking to re-enter a regulated profession can more effectively evaluate whether they have the time, financial resources, and desire to embark on this often lengthy process.

Step-by-step estimates of time and cost represent a particularly valuable resource, as they help identify the potential setbacks.

Recently, the Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA) partnered with Upwardly Global to develop an extensive set of Michigan-specific licensing guides for 44 regulated professions, ranging from accounting and architecture to physical therapy, social work, and teaching. LARA has also created a telephone hotline to connect immigrants with licensing specialists who can answer their questions about professional licensing in Michigan.²⁶

Similarly, the Philadelphia-based **Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians** has developed a set of resources tailored to the needs of skilled immigrants in Pennsylvania. The guides focus on “high growth” industries—accounting and auditing, mechanical engineering, systems analysis, and teaching—providing state-specific information on licensing requirements, average salaries in each field, and a list of local employers.²⁷ The guides also include detailed instructions on submitting licensure applications

25 Upwardly Global, “Professional Licensing Guides,” accessed October 9, 2015, www.upwardlyglobal.org/skilled-immigrant-job-seekers/american-licensed-professions.

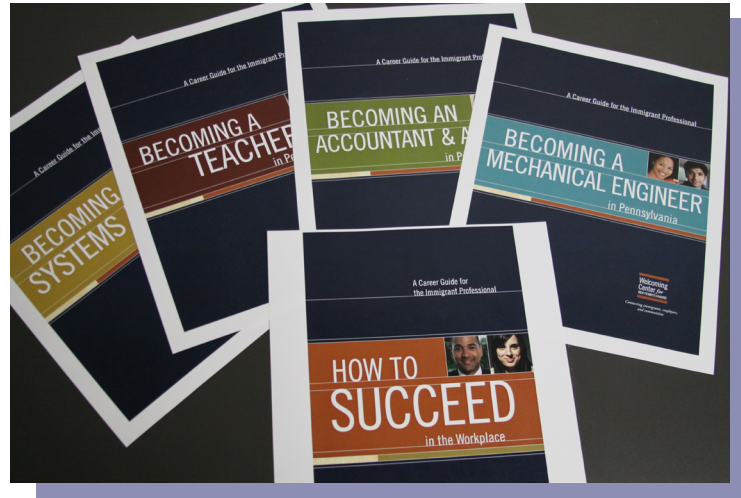
26 Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, “An Online Resource for Skilled Immigrants,” accessed June 22, 2016, www.michigan.gov/lara/0,4601,7-154-10573_68301---,00.html.

27 Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, “Publication Downloads,” accessed October 9, 2015, www.welcomingcenter.org/publications/publication-downloads; Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, *Becoming an Accountant & Auditor in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, n.d.), www.welcomingcenter.org/sites/default/files/imagefield_thumbs/accountantguide.pdf.



and highlight other skills, such as proficiency in certain software programs or technologies, that are frequently requested by employers.

While career and licensing guides specific to foreign-trained immigrants are an effective way to provide accurate and accessible information to individuals hoping to relicense, they must generally be state-specific and rely on the engagement of an organization with extensive knowledge of each profession's licensing rules and procedures. Nonetheless, when available, such guides can help skilled immigrants avoid costly and time-consuming mistakes such as choosing the wrong credit evaluation agency, enrolling in unnecessary educational programs, or taking licensing examinations without sufficient preparation.²⁸



Career guides for immigrant professionals created by the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians.

Image credit: Migration Policy Institute

B. Career Guidance and Navigation

Even when tailored licensing guides and information are available, many foreign-trained immigrants still need individualized assistance to create a strategy that takes account of their personal circumstances as well as potential obstacles they may face as they seek to re-enter their profession. Initiatives that provide navigation assistance must have in-depth knowledge of the state-specific requirements of particular fields and an arsenal of effective, practical strategies to help immigrants from a wide range of backgrounds and personal circumstances stay on course—often a multi-year process—as they complete credential evaluations, fill gaps, prepare for exams, and begin their job search. For example, a foreign-educated teacher seeking a license in California may need guidance selecting an appropriate credential evaluation agency, choosing whether to apply for a preliminary teaching credential prior to full licensure, and understanding the steps to take if the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) decides the applicant's foreign credentials do not meet California standards.²⁹

Experienced career counselors can also help identify alternative occupations for skilled immigrants who cannot or do not wish to pursue full relicensure. In some cases, the cost and time associated with relicensing may cause foreign-trained immigrants to pursue an alternate career in their field that provides skilled employment and higher wages without requiring full relicensing. For example, foreign-trained physicians who have practiced for many years abroad may settle for other positions in the health care field rather than re-enter their profession at the residency stage. Career counseling is often essential in helping inform and guide individuals as they make these important decisions, offering an accurate assessment of the various options available to take advantage of prior education and work experience.

²⁸ For example, many states limit the number of times an individual can take the U.S. Medical Licensing Examination (USLME), and multiple attempts may negatively impact a candidate's residency application. See, for example, Amy Lynn Sorrel, "TMA Evaluates New Policy on Medical Licensing Tests," *Texas Medicine* 110, no. 2 (2014): 27–31, www.texmed.org/Template.aspx?id=29965; University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) International Medical Graduate (IMG) Program, "Program Prerequisites," updated April 2014, <http://fm.mednet.ucla.edu/IMG/application/prerequisites.asp>.

²⁹ Upwardly Global, "California Teacher Professional Licensing Guide," accessed June 23, 2016, www.upwardlyglobal.org/skilled-immigrant-job-seekers/american-licensed-professions/california/california/teacher.

For example, since 2012, the Denver-based **Colorado Welcome Back Center** has successfully helped 19 internationally trained physicians overcome what is perhaps the most challenging hurdle for immigrant physicians—“matching” or being selected to participate in a medical residency program.³⁰ Foreign-educated physicians, often referred to as international medical graduates (IMGs), must apply



Colorado Welcome Back Center participants learn medical terminology.

Image credit: Spring Institute

certification were ultimately successful,³¹ and of the 12,790 IMGs who participated in the National Resident Matching Program in 2016, only 52 percent were successfully matched with a residency program.³²

Helping immigrant physicians navigate this long and complex process requires sustained support and coaching from case managers who can provide expert advice. The Colorado Welcome Back Center offers a series of workshops to guide clients through preparing an effective residency application, including how to create an appropriate CV, successfully use the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS), and craft a compelling personal statement. The center also offers general workshops on interviewing for health care careers, networking, and advancing in the workplace.³³

C. Filling Gaps in Education and Training

Given the country-to-country differences between educational systems and professional requirements, many foreign-trained immigrants must complete additional coursework before they are eligible to practice a regulated profession in the United States. Some professions also require internationally educated applicants to complete additional training or fulfill practical experience requirements before gaining full licensure. And even for professions that are not regulated or do not have practical experience requirements, gaining U.S. work experience offers an effective way to demonstrate competence to potential employers.

30 Author communication with Benjamin Jutson, Program Manager, Colorado Welcome Back Center, by email, January 13, 2017; Spring Institute, “Colorado Welcome Back,” accessed June 22, 2016, www.springinstitute.org/colorado-welcome-back/.

31 Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG), *2015 Annual Report* (Philadelphia: ECFMG, 2016), www.ecfm.org/resources/ECFMG-2015-annual-report.pdf.

32 ECFMG, “Summary Data Related to ECFMG Certification” (fact sheet, ECFMG, Philadelphia, February 2016), www.ecfm.org/forms/factcard.pdf.

33 Spring Institute, “Past Events,” accessed February 8, 2017, www.springinstitute.org/events/list/?tribe_paged=1&tribe_event_display=past.



The **Cooper Union Retraining Program for Immigrant Engineers** in New York City offers a variety of coursework intended to help foreign-trained engineers update their skills and experience for the U.S. job market. The courses are free and taught in the evenings and on weekends to better serve participants who are already employed in survival jobs or outside the engineering field. Unlike some regulated professions, not all engineering positions require licensure and, because the process to obtain a Professional Engineer (PE) license can be time consuming, many foreign-trained immigrants choose to pursue an exempt position.³⁴ Additional coursework can help these immigrants update their qualifications and technical knowledge to better compete for these jobs.

The retraining program is currently managed by the workforce development department of the Brooklyn-based nonprofit **CAMBA**, which has extensive experience serving high-skilled immigrants through the New York City-funded Immigrant Bridge Program. Through CAMBA, students have access to advising, career readiness, and job placement services that aim to help them find skilled employment in the engineering field.³⁵ Since 1987, the retraining program for engineers has served more 3,000 students and now reaches 225 clients annually.³⁶

The **Welcome Back Center of Suburban Maryland**, housed within the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services' Latino Health Initiative, coordinates a unique program that provides paid internships at local hospitals to foreign-trained nurses, enabling participants to gain paid U.S. work experience under the supervision of hospital staff and build professional connections while working toward full relicensure. Participants obtain a Certified Nursing Assistant license—readily available in Maryland to those with at least two years of nursing education—and work as “nurses in training.” The Welcome Back Center also provides initial assessments, individualized career planning, NCLEX preparation classes, financial assistance, and resume writing workshops. As of fiscal year (FY) 2015, 57 participants had passed the nursing licensure exam and 47 had obtained work as RNs in Maryland, reporting an average wage increase of 167 percent from when they began the program.³⁷

This program simultaneously benefits internationally trained behavioral health workers ... and the local community.

The center has also begun piloting a similar program for foreign-trained professionals in the behavioral health field, a response to the urgent need for bilingual and culturally competent professionals in the community. In recent years, Montgomery County has received an influx of child migrants from Central America, many of whom have experienced trauma and need counseling and other support services as they reunite with family members in the United States.³⁸ In partnership with Fairfax County Public Schools and the Positive Youth Program, the Welcome Back Center of Suburban Maryland trained 16 immigrant behavioral health professionals to facilitate family reunification workshops, reaching 130 children and nearly 100 families in FY 2015.³⁹ Thus, this

34 Upwardly Global, “New York Engineer Professional Licensing Guide,” accessed January 18, 2017, www.upwardlyglobal.org/skilled-immigrant-job-seekers/american-licensed-professions/new-york/new-york/engineer

35 The Cooper Union, “Retraining Program for Immigrant Engineers,” accessed June 23, 2016, www.cooper.edu/academics/outreach-and-pre-college/retraining-program-immigrant-engineers.

36 CAMBA, “The Cooper Union Retraining Program at CAMBA,” accessed June 23, 2016, www.camba.org/cooperunion.

37 Montgomery County Latino Health Initiative, *FY 2015 Annual Report: Responding to Increasing and More Complex Needs of Our Community* (Silver Spring, MD: Montgomery County Latino Health Initiative, 2016), <http://lhiinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/2015-LHI-Annual-Report-508.pdf>.

38 In the fiscal years 2014-16, more than 2,700 unaccompanied child migrants were released to sponsors in Montgomery County. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement, “Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by County—FY 2014-16,” accessed February 8, 2017, www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/unaccompanied-children-released-to-sponsors-by-county.

39 Ibid.



program simultaneously benefits internationally trained behavioral health workers by enabling them to practice and the local community by providing important, in-demand services.

As noted earlier, immigrant physicians face one of the stiffest practical experience requirements—irrespective of their years of experience they are required to begin their U.S. career at the residency stage, competing against U.S.-educated medical students for limited residency positions.⁴⁰ The **International Medical Graduate Program at the University of California, Los Angeles** Department of Family Medicine addresses many of the obstacles that prevent foreign-trained physicians from obtaining residency positions. In return for spending two to three years working in underserved communities, Spanish-speaking immigrant physicians receive training to fill gaps in their education and work experience to make their residency application more competitive. The program provides participants with stipends to cover living expenses as they prepare for the USMLE, perfect medical English skills, participate in clinical observerships, and complete residency applications. Those who successfully finish the program also receive letters of recommendation—an important element of residency applications and a major obstacle for many foreign-trained physicians without professional connections in the United States.⁴¹

Like the Welcome Back Center’s pilot initiative for behavioral health professionals, this program serves a dual purpose by helping internationally trained physicians begin careers in the United States while also increasing the number of bilingual and bicultural physicians in California’s underserved communities. The program meets a crucial need: just 4 percent of California physicians are Latino, compared to 38 percent of the overall population.⁴² Since 2007, more than 100 foreign-trained medical graduates have obtained residencies through the International Medical Graduate Program, with many working in shortage areas such as the San Joaquin Valley and Inland Empire region.⁴³

D. Building Professional-Level English

MPI research has found that English proficiency is a major factor in whether foreign-trained immigrants obtain employment commensurate with their education and work experience,⁴⁴ and the 2015 IMPRINT study also concluded that English skills are strongly correlated with immigrants’ professional success more broadly. However, finding English courses that will help skilled immigrants develop job-specific vocabulary and communication skills can prove challenging.

English Health Train, a curriculum developed and piloted by the **San Francisco Welcome Back Center**, is specifically designed to help foreign-educated health care workers build their English proficiency in order to pass licensing examinations, interact with patients, and communicate effectively with colleagues.⁴⁵ The curriculum is divided into five modules, each focused on a theme: Exploring Career Goals in Health Care, Communicating with Patients and Families, Communicating with other Health Professionals, Exploring Critical Issues in Health Care, and Intercultural Communication. The lessons cover topics that range from career pathways in health care and workplace expectations to gathering patient information, using medical terminology, and handling challenging situations with coworkers. A

40 Rabben, *Credential Recognition in the United States for Foreign Professionals*.

41 UCLA IMG Program, “Program Curriculum,” accessed October 29, 2015, <https://fm.mednet.ucla.edu/IMG/program/curriculum.asp>.

42 Craig Paxton, *California Physicians: Surplus or Scarcity?* (Oakland, CA: California HealthCare Foundation, 2014), www.chcf.org/~media/MEDIA%20LIBRARY%20Files/PDF/PDF%20C/PDF%20CaliforniaPhysiciansSurplusSupply2014.pdf.

43 UCLA IMG Program, “IMG Match By Year,” updated March 2016, <https://fm.mednet.ucla.edu/IMG/about/matches.asp>; Paxton, *California Physicians*; UCLA IMG Program, “News,” updated July 2015, <https://fm.mednet.ucla.edu/IMG/program/news.asp>.

44 Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix with Peter A. Creticos, *Uneven Progress: The Employment Pathways of Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2008), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/uneven-progress-employment-pathways-skilled-immigrants-united-states.

45 English Health Train, “About,” accessed June 20, 2016, <http://englishhealthtrain.welcomebackinitiative.org/about/>.



number of educational institutions across the country have since adopted this curriculum and use it to serve foreign-trained health professionals.⁴⁶

Similarly, the **Chicago Bilingual Nurse Consortium (CBNC)** has developed English workshops for internationally educated nurses who seek to practice in the United States. Created in 2002 to help Mexican nurses obtain RN licenses and fill a need for bilingual and bicultural nurses in the Chicago area, CBNC has since served more than 700 nurses from 60 countries.⁴⁷ The English workshops offered by the consortium emphasize nursing vocabulary and conversational skills for interacting with patients and doctors, seeking employment, and passing licensing exams. Workshops include TOEFL preparation, English conversation groups, peer support and mentoring, writing for professional and personal communication, and therapeutic communication focused on interacting with patients and families.⁴⁸ These workshops provide an accessible way for internationally trained nurses to supplement standard English language instruction and build the professional communication skills needed in a U.S. health care setting.

The English workshops offered by the consortium emphasize nursing vocabulary and conversational skills for interacting with patients and doctors.

The **Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians** also offers targeted courses to help foreign-trained professionals build English language skills for a variety of academic and professional settings. As a member of the Welcome Back Initiative, the center has adapted the English Health Train curriculum for its English for Health Care Workers course, which serves foreign-trained immigrants in a broad range of healthcare professions. In addition, the Welcoming Center offers NCLEX and TOEFL preparation courses as well as popular Academic English/College Prep English and Professional Writing courses.⁴⁹

These courses are intended to bridge the gap between general English literacy instruction and the advanced writing and communication skills required for many high-skilled jobs. Such programs are geared towards individuals who have completed or tested out of the Welcoming Center's general English language classes, which are offered from the beginner through the advanced level. By charging a small fee, the Welcoming Center is able to provide these additional, specialized courses to supplement the lower-level courses that are supported by federal and state adult education funding.⁵⁰ Given the widespread lack of publicly funded English classes for individuals seeking to pass the TOEFL or achieve similarly advanced levels of English proficiency, such courses represent a unique and particularly useful service for immigrant professionals.

E. Developing Soft Skills and Overcoming Employer Bias

Foreign-trained immigrants in both regulated and unregulated fields face significant job market hurdles due to a lack of familiarity with U.S. employment search and workplace expectations, limited professional

46 Ibid.

47 Chicago Bilingual Nurse Consortium (CBNC), "History of the CBNC," accessed June 22, 2016, <http://chicagobilingualnurse.org/historyCBNC.html>; CBNC, "How We Help," accessed June 22, 2016, <http://chicagobilingualnurse.org/helpCBNC.html>.

48 CBNC, "How We Help."

49 Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, "Summary of Services," accessed January 18, 2017, <http://welcomingcenter.org/services/summary>.

50 Author interview with Nicole Pumphrey, Director of Strategic Partnerships, Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, by phone, January 18, 2017.



networks and social capital, and biases on the part of employers who may discount skills and experience gained abroad. Guidance in navigating these obstacles—as well as opportunities to network and practice interview skills—significantly improve immigrants’ employment prospects.

The Job Seeker Training Program run by **Upwardly Global** provides assistance in compiling resumes, drafting cover letters, and practicing interview and networking skills, as well as individualized support from employment coaches and mentors.⁵¹ For immigrant professionals who do not live in the cities served by Upwardly Global, an online training program offers workshops such as “Marketing Yourself for a U.S. Job Search,” “Online Job Search Skills,” and “Networking to Connect with Employers.”⁵² The organization has also developed a free online resume template that guides users through creating a resume that will market their skills and experience to U.S. employers, including tips on how to present work experience gained in a survival job and on important U.S. resume conventions.⁵³ These services have proved highly effective, assisting more than 850 foreign-trained professionals in obtaining skilled employment in 2016.⁵⁴

Through its employer partnerships, Upwardly Global also addresses common challenges that immigrant professionals face such as employers’ preference for U.S. education and training or their uncertainty about how to evaluate international skills and experience. The organization attempts to increase employers’ comfort with hiring internationally trained applicants by maintaining a database of immigrant jobseekers prescreened by Upwardly Global, while its mentorship programs bring together staff from local businesses and immigrant jobseekers in order to help reduce misconceptions and improve understanding of the qualifications earned abroad.

A partnership between Upwardly Global and the professional services company Accenture, for example, has developed into a robust program through which more than 1,700 Accenture employees have volunteered as mentors, participated in networking events, and conducted mock interviews for foreign-trained immigrants since 2011. In October 2015, Accenture announced that it would provide \$1.2 million in grant funding and pro bono services to further develop the Upwardly Global curriculum and online training platform.⁵⁵ The company has also hired 17 Upwardly Global jobseekers for key roles such as software development.⁵⁶



Upwardly Global clients meet with volunteers at a networking event.

Image credit: Upwardly Global

51 Upwardly Global, “For Skilled Immigrant Job Seekers,” accessed October 14, 2015, www.upwardlyglobal.org/skilled-immigrant-job-seekers.

52 Ibid.

53 Upwardly Global, “UpGlo Resume Template,” accessed October 14, 2015, www.upwardlyglobal.org/skilled-immigrant-job-seekers/us-job-seeker-tips/Resume_Template_Directions_Sample.doc/view.

54 Author communication with Nikki Cicerani.

55 Accenture, “Accenture to Help Upwardly Global Expand Jobs Training Program for Immigrants and Refugees in the U.S.” (news release, October 22, 2015), <https://newsroom.accenture.com/news/accenture-to-help-upwardly-global-expand-jobs-training-program-for-immigrants-and-refugees-in-the-us.htm>.

56 Author communication with Nikki Cicerani.



The **Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians** has also worked to address employer bias, creating resources to familiarize businesses with the state’s immigrant population and providing services that help local employers become more confident in assessing and hiring immigrant jobseekers. These employer-focused services offer a pool of prescreened professionals and guidance and support to businesses whose human resources staff may lack experience with foreign-trained workers.⁵⁷ At the same time, the organization also provides a range of services to ensure its immigrant clients understand employer expectations—for example, career guidance and workshops to develop networking and business skills.

F. Addressing Policy Barriers

Among the potential solutions to obstacles that prevent or slow immigrants’ re-entry into skilled employment, policy change has proved the most elusive. Because many licensed professions are regulated by state agencies granted authority to set licensing standards, efforts to address legal or administrative barriers must engage decisionmakers in state and local government, licensing bodies, and professional associations. The following examples offer lessons on effectively involving these many stakeholders in initiatives to improve the integration of highly skilled immigrants; they range from making information about professional licensing more accessible, to allocating funds for career services and, in some cases, reducing or removing unnecessary licensing requirements.

Efforts to address legal or administrative barriers must engage decisionmakers in state and local government, licensing bodies, and professional associations.

The **Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition’s** New Americans Integration Institute, an E Pluribus Unum award winner, has long worked to raise awareness of issues affecting skilled immigrants in the state. The institute has also conducted labor-market research and studies of health care professionals and engineers in Massachusetts, building a case for policies that will allow foreign-trained immigrants to put their education and training to better use as part of the state workforce.⁵⁸

In 2014 and 2015, the institute coordinated a statewide Task Force on Immigrant Healthcare Professionals that was cochaired by the Executive Director of the state Office of Refugees and Immigrants and the Assistant Secretary of the state Office of Access and Opportunity.⁵⁹ The task force developed recommendations for ways the Massachusetts government could support foreign-trained health care workers that ranged from improving online resources and data collection to providing funding to help skilled immigrants pay for education, testing, and licensing fees.⁶⁰

The task force also recommended that the state Executive Office of Health and Human Services convene a working group that would include representatives of the Division of Professional Licensure,

57 Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, “For Professionals,” accessed October 14, 2015, www.welcomingcenter.org/immigrants/immigrant-professionals; Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, “Finding Professionals,” accessed October 14, 2015, www.welcomingcenter.org/employers/find-trained-professionals.

58 Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, “Workforce Development: High-Skilled Immigrants and the Massachusetts Workforce,” accessed February 8, 2017, www.miracoalition.org/workforce-development-110457.

59 Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, “Nation’s First State Task Force Addressing the Barriers Facing Foreign-Born Healthcare Professionals Meets” (news release, May 21, 2014), http://salsa3.salsalabs.com/o/50862/t/0/blastContent.jsp?email_blast_KEY=1283813.

60 Jeffrey Gross, *R_x for Strengthening Massachusetts’ Economy and Healthcare System* (Boston: The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Governor’s Advisory Council for Refugees and Immigrants, 2014), www.miracoalition.org/images/stories/gac_task_force_report_final-12.18.14.pdf.



the Department of Public Health's Division of Health Professions Licensure, and state boards of registration for various health care professions. The aim of the joint working group would be to identify opportunities at the state and federal levels to reduce unnecessarily burdensome requirements, streamline licensure processes, and explore new strategies to help foreign-trained immigrants meet the education and training requirements for licensure, including by expanding the use of prior learning assessment.⁶¹

Other organizations have also attempted to influence policies that affect immigrants' re-entry into the high-skilled workforce. The **Welcome Back Initiative** has educated policymakers about the obstacles facing foreign-trained professionals, as well as the unmet demand for labor in the health care field that could be remedied by facilitating employment of individuals trained abroad. In 2015, with support from the initiative, Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard of California introduced the *Professional's Access to Health (PATH) Workforce Integration Act* with the intent of providing funding for programs to assist foreign-trained health care workers who wish to relicense.⁶² The legislation, which was originally included in the *Health Equity and Accountability Act of 2014*, authorized the Secretary of Health and Human Services to make grants to public health, community, faith-based, nonprofit, and other organizations.⁶³ These funds were to be used for activities to help unemployed or underemployed immigrants re-enter the health care field, training to reduce barriers to re-entry or advancement, assistance with credential evaluation and accessing contextualized English language instruction, and outreach to educate employers about the qualifications of foreign-trained health professionals. While neither bill became a law, they demonstrate how legislation could be used to support the training and relicensure of foreign-trained immigrants.

In a few recent cases, licensing bodies have updated policies to reduce barriers to entry for foreign-trained professionals. For example, nursing boards in many states have eased certain requirements that created unnecessarily high hurdles for foreign-trained nurses. Nearly all states now allow internationally educated nurses to demonstrate their English proficiency by passing the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam—which includes a live interview—in place of the primarily computer-based and highly academic TOEFL.⁶⁴ In Washington State, the Puget Sound Welcome Back Center—a Des Moines-based member of the Welcome Back Initiative—was instrumental in convincing the Washington State Nursing Commission to allow nurses to demonstrate their English proficiency by earning a passing score on either the IELST or the TOEFL.⁶⁵ This achievement can serve as a good example for organizations of how educating licensing bodies about the challenges foreign-trained immigrants face and engaging in advocacy around particular barriers can successfully lead to changes in licensing rules.

IV. Federal and State Policy Developments

Awareness of the challenges facing foreign-trained professionals continues to grow due to ongoing efforts to demonstrate the extent of brain waste and the benefits of helping immigrants re-enter skilled

61 Ibid.

62 Office of Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard, "Rep. Roybal-Allard Introduces Bill to Integrate Foreign-Trained Health Professionals into U.S. Health Workforce" (news release, June 11, 2015), <http://roybal-allard.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=397854>.

63 *Health Equity and Accountability Act of 2014*, HR 5294, 113th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 160, no. 121, daily ed. (July 30, 2014): H 7049.

64 See, for example, Voice of America, "TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC? Comparing the Tests," Voice of America: Learning English, July 22, 2015, <http://learningenglish.voanews.com/content/toefl-ielts-toeic-comparing-the-tests/2873821.html>; Nguyen, Norouzi, and Montalto, *Reducing Brain Waste*.

65 Nguyen, Norouzi, and Montalto, *Reducing Brain Waste*.



employment, as well as the success of efforts such as those described in Section III that help well-educated immigrants re-enter their fields.⁶⁶ Projected shortages in health care occupations such as nursing and primary care—as well as in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields more generally—have also drawn attention to the untapped potential of foreign-educated professionals who reside in the United States but are unable to practice.⁶⁷ While progress at the national level remains halting, certain states and localities have sought to address these challenges. Some have prioritized the integration of foreign-trained professionals and passed laws, allocated funding, or established new programs to better take advantage of these immigrants' skills and experience.

While progress at the national level remains halting, certain states and localities have sought to address these challenges.

In keeping with Governor Rick Snyder's pledge to support Michigan's economic comeback by attracting and retaining immigrants, in November 2015 the Michigan Office for New Americans created the **Michigan International Talent Solutions** (MITS) program. MITS—which operates as a partnership with Upwardly Global—helps connect employers with immigrant jobseekers and provides a range of job training services for foreign-educated immigrants, including resume development, assistance completing job applications, and networking opportunities.⁶⁸ Adding an important additional dimension to this effort, in December 2016, the Michigan Office for New Americans awarded grants of up to \$50,000 to five organizations to provide innovative English language programs. The grants seek to address the unmet need for vocational English courses and courses that prepare immigrants for exams required for professional licenses and higher education.

Focusing more narrowly on a single occupation, the Minnesota state legislature passed a law in 2014 to create a **Task Force on Foreign-Trained Physicians**. Similar to the task force convened in Massachusetts (see Section III.F), the primary aim of the Minnesota task force was to identify strategies to facilitate the integration of immigrant physicians into the state's health care workforce.⁶⁹ The group found that one of the most prominent barriers was that many residency programs' requirement that individuals submit an application for the program no more than three to five years after graduating from medical school (therefore excluding highly qualified immigrants with decades of experience practicing medicine). Another common obstacle was the requirement or preference that residency applicants demonstrate U.S. clinical experience (extremely difficult or impossible for those not enrolled in U.S. medical school).⁷⁰ The task force argued that helping immigrant physicians relicense would generate a high return on investment, reduce the health disparities affecting the state's immigrant and refugee communities, and help alleviate physician shortages in rural or underserved areas.

66 See, for example, Madeline Zavodny, *Immigration and American Jobs* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and Partnership for a New American Economy, 2011), www.renewoureconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/NAE_Im-AmerJobs.pdf; Batalova and Fix with Creticos, *Uneven Progress*.

67 See, for example, Gross, *Rx for Strengthening Massachusetts' Economy and Healthcare System*; Minnesota Department of Health, *Task Force on Foreign-Trained Physicians*; New York City Economic Development Corporation, "Immigrant Bridge," accessed June 23, 2016, www.nycedc.com/program/immigrant-bridge; Information Technology Industry Council, Partnership for a New American Economy, and U.S. Chamber of Commerce, *Help Wanted: The Role of Foreign Workers in the Innovation Economy* (New York and Washington, DC: Information Technology Industry Council, Partnership for a New American Economy, and U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2012), www.renewoureconomy.org/sites/all/themes/pnae/stem-report.pdf.

68 Michigan Office of New Americans, "New State Initiative Connects Global Talent with Employers; Skilled Immigrants Can Help Grow the Economy and Fill Skills Gap" (news release, November 2, 2015), www.michigan.gov/ona/0,5629,7-323-75982-368409--,00.html.

69 Minnesota Department of Health, "Task Force on Immigrant IMGs (International Medical Graduates)," accessed November 3, 2015, www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/workforce/iimg/.

70 Minnesota Department of Health, *Task Force on Foreign-Trained Physicians*.



Acting on these recommendations, Minnesota recently created an International Medical Graduates Assistance Program. It has also moved ahead in developing a state certificate of clinical readiness as well as a grants program to fund career guidance services and clinical preparation programs for immigrant physicians who need additional experience prior to residency. Both the certificate and the clinical preparation program will be groundbreaking as they promise to not only solve the often insurmountable challenge of demonstrating that foreign clinical experience meets U.S. standards, but also to provide an avenue to access U.S. training for those who need additional preparation.

Under the newly created International Medical Graduates Assistance Program, internationally-educated physicians who have lived in Minnesota for at least two years and have work authorization will be eligible for state-funded residency positions if they agree to provide primary care in a rural or underserved part of the state for five years after program completion and to contribute to a revolving fund to support future residency positions. In keeping with other recommendations made by the state task force, the Commissioner of Health has also been charged with identifying strategies to facilitate foreign-trained physicians' entry into alternative health care occupations and exploring ways to reduce barriers created by licensing and other regulations.⁷¹

At the federal level, the **White House Task Force on New Americans**—created as part of President Obama's November 2014 Executive Actions on Immigration—sought to identify strategies to improve integration of immigrants, refugees, and their children. Improving the integration of skilled immigrants was a key concern in many comments submitted to the Task Force for consideration as it drafted the National Integration Plan ordered by the President. Suggestions submitted by stakeholders to the Task Force included: developing strategies to better leverage *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA) services for foreign-trained professionals; providing funding and technical assistance for states and localities working to integrate high-skilled immigrants; and exploring the creation of a national system to streamline professional certification and licensure.⁷²

In order to delve more deeply into issues raised, in June 2016 the task force hosted a National Credential and Skills Institute. Using an application process that asked potential participants to describe specific problems facing the skilled immigrant population in their region, the event brought together 18 state and local teams to discuss relicensing barriers and identify strategies to accelerate the integration of foreign-trained immigrants into the professional workforce.⁷³ Participating teams sought strategies for a diverse range of challenges, including identifying funding opportunities and successfully engaging employers. Acting as a forum for exchange, the institute allowed teams to share promising strategies and to hear from federal agency representatives about potential opportunities to support skilled immigrants' access to education, training, and professional licensure.

The exploration of specific credentialing problems and change strategies, such as those discussed at the institute, also fits within the focus of a new \$7.5 million **Occupational Licensing Review and Portability Grant** competition announced by the U.S. Department of Labor in June 2016. The grant program supports occupational licensing reform by funding collaborations between three

71 Minnesota State Legislature, Minnesota Session Laws, S.F. 1458, Chapter 71, 89th Legislature, 2015 Regular Session (May 20, 2015), www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/?id=71&year=2015&type=0.

72 Welcoming Economies Global Network, "Call for Ideas for White House Task Force on New Americans for an Immigrant Integration Plan" (policy recommendations, Welcoming Economies Global Network, Detroit, 2015), www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/WEGN_TaskForce_Recommendations.pdf; National Skills Coalition, "Recommendations to the White House Task Force on New Americans" (policy recommendations, National Skills Coalition, Washington, DC, 2015), www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/NSC_TaskForce_Recommendations.pdf; National Partnership for New Americans, "Recommendations to the White House Task Force on New Americans" (policy recommendations, National Partnership for New Americans, February 9, 2015), www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/NPNA_TaskForce_Recommendations.pdf.

73 IMPRINT, "White House Convening Addresses Credentialing and Licensing Barriers Facing Skilled Immigrants," accessed January 27, 2017, www.imprintproject.org/white-house-convening-addresses-credentialing-and-licensing-barriers-facing-skilled-immigrants/.



nonprofit organizations and a coalition of 10 states to identify best practices, make recommendations, and implement strategies to improve the portability of licenses and reduce unnecessary or overly burdensome regulations.⁷⁴ The White House announcement notes that such restrictions can pose particular challenges for veterans, military spouses, and individuals with criminal records, while also highlighting progress made during the National Credential and Skills Institute to address similar issues facing skilled immigrants and refugees.⁷⁵

Experience from the **Job-Driven National Emergency Grant (JD NEG)** program demonstrates that simply listing foreign-trained immigrants as a group eligible for federally funded services can encourage states to serve them. The JD NEGs were announced in 2014 as a way to provide one-time grants to states for offering additional services to dislocated workers on top of those funded by the *Workforce Investment Act (WIA)*. The grant announcement explicitly noted that eligible participants included “foreign-trained immigrant workers, who qualify as dislocated workers, and have faced barriers to obtaining employment in their trained field or profession.”⁷⁶ A number of states identified immigrant professionals as a target population in their JD NEG proposals. Notably, the Boise-based nonprofit Global Talent Idaho received \$320,000 in JD NEG funding from the state of Idaho to provide services for foreign-trained immigrants, including English for Professional Purposes courses and three-month paid internships with local employers—many of which led to permanent positions.⁷⁷

Simply listing foreign-trained immigrants as a group eligible for federally funded services can encourage states to serve them.

The high-profile **ApprenticeshipUSA** initiative could provide similar opportunities to create pathways into skilled employment for foreign-trained immigrants. Registered apprenticeship programs allow participants to earn wages while gaining on-the-job experience and completing related education or training that leads to an industry-recognized credential.⁷⁸ As part of a \$90 million ApprenticeshipUSA grant program created by the Department of Labor in 2016 to expand availability of apprenticeships, Maryland proposed using a portion of the state’s \$2 million grant for a pilot program to help internationally educated immigrants re-enter the health care workforce.⁷⁹ The initiative reflects a desire to expand alternative pathways to industry-recognized credentials and middle-skill jobs outside of existing postsecondary education programs. For foreign-trained immigrants, apprenticeships offer

74 U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, “U.S. Labor Department Awards \$7.5M to Fund Research for Improving Geographic Mobility for Workers in Licensed Occupations” (news release, U.S. Department of Labor, January 12, 2017), www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/eta/eta20170112-0.

75 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “FACT SHEET: New Steps to Reduce Unnecessary Occupation Licenses That Are Limiting Worker Mobility and Reducing Wages” (news release, The White House, Washington, DC, June 17, 2016), www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/17/fact-sheet-new-steps-reduce-unnecessary-occupation-licenses-are-limiting.

76 U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, “Job-Driven National Emergency Grants” (Training and Employment Notice No. 29-13, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC, April 28, 2014), https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEN/TEN_%2029_13_Acc.pdf.

77 Silja Kallenbach and Andy Nash, *Adult Education and Immigrant Integration: Lessons Learned from the Networks for Integrating New Americans Initiative* (Boston: World Education, 2016), www.worlded.org/WEIInternet/inc/common/download_pub.cfm?id=16503&lid=3.

78 U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, “What is Registered Apprenticeship?” updated November 21, 2014, www.doleta.gov/oa/apprenticeship.cfm.

79 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “FACT SHEET: Investing \$90 Million through ApprenticeshipUSA to Expand Proven Pathways into the Middle Class” (news release, The White House, Washington, DC, April 21, 2016), www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/fact-sheet-investing-90-million-through-apprenticeshipusa-expand-proven; U.S. Department of Labor, “ApprenticeshipUSA State Expansion Grant Summaries” (guidance document, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC, n.d.), www.dol.gov/sites/default/files/2016-apprenticeship-state-project-summaries.pdf.



an appealing path toward permanent employment that allows them to earn wages while also gaining relevant U.S. work experience and participating in education and training opportunities.

The 2014 *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA) also provides opportunities to expand assistance for highly skilled immigrants within the country’s adult education and workforce training systems. Perhaps of most immediate significance, the law requires states to provide Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) services with at least 12 percent of their federal adult education funds, and specifically identifies “professionals with degrees and credentials in their native countries” as a population eligible for services.⁸⁰ The IELCE program, which replaces the English Literacy and Civics program that existed under the prior workforce law, is designed to integrate English language instruction with opportunities for workforce training. While strict performance measures mandated by WIOA may make it more difficult for individuals with lower levels of education to access training services, the IELCE program could prove well-suited to the needs of highly skilled immigrants seeking to acquire professional-level English skills while participating in workforce training opportunities.

Other WIOA provisions may also increase access to workforce services for foreign-trained immigrants. Title I of the law (which governs how the majority of workforce funds are distributed) establishes a priority of service for certain individuals in adult employment and training services, including those who are basic skills deficient. The law’s definition of basic skills deficient individuals includes those who cannot “read, write, or speak English at a level necessary to function on the job, in the individual’s family, or in society”—a definition that includes foreign-trained immigrants who are not yet proficient in English.

*California has used this discretionary funding to create its
Workforce Accelerator Fund, which supports programs that fill
gaps in education.*

More generally, WIOA’s performance accountability measures place heavy emphasis on employment outcomes, giving significant weight to participants’ employment status and median earnings after program exit.⁸¹ While these measures may result in fewer services under Title I for individuals with low levels of education and English proficiency, who could pull down a program’s overall performance score, they may benefit foreign-trained immigrants who are better prepared to enter middle- and high-skill jobs and therefore pose less risk for meeting performance measures.

In addition to regular Title I formula funds, states also have a limited amount of WIOA Title I discretionary funding that could support job training and other career services for highly skilled immigrants. California has used this discretionary funding to create its Workforce Accelerator Fund, which supports programs that fill gaps in education and training services for individuals, including immigrants, who face barriers to employment.⁸² Upwardly Global has won two \$150,000 grants through the state’s Workforce Accelerator Fund competitions, enabling the organization to provide

80 *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA), Public Law 113-128, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 128 (2014) 1425, Sec. 203 (12), www.congress.gov/bills/hr803/BILLS-113hr803enr.pdf.

81 The six common performance measures that apply to all WIOA Title I (workforce) and Title II (adult education) programs include the share of participants in unsubsidized employment in the second and fourth quarters after exit from the program and “median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program.” See WIOA, Title I Sec. 116 (b)(2)(A)(i)(I)-(III).

82 GAO, *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Selected States’ Planning Approaches for Serving Job Seekers and Employers* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2016), www.gao.gov/assets/690/681019.pdf.



services to foreign-trained immigrants seeking employment in California.⁸³ WIOA discretionary funding focused on innovative programs or underserved populations may be accessible to organizations serving foreign-trained immigrants in other states as well.

V. Ongoing Challenges and Recommendations

These promising initiatives and policy developments notwithstanding, a number of stubborn obstacles continue to impede efforts to assist highly educated immigrants as they seek skilled employment or relicensure in the United States.

Occupational licensing rules are difficult to reform. Most professional licensing regulations are set at the state level by occupation-specific licensing boards. With states requiring licensure for an average 92 occupations,⁸⁴ the result is a wide array of licensing bodies and complex web of regulations that stakeholders working to reduce unnecessary barriers must typically address on a state-by-state and occupation-by-occupation basis. For example, California's Little Hoover Commission, an independent oversight agency that promotes improvements in governance, published a report in 2016 detailing the results of hearings and other research into the "thicket of occupational regulation that desperately needs untangling" in the state.⁸⁵ It notes, for example, that California has three boards that oversee the nursing profession alone—one for registered nurses, one for licensed vocational nurses, and one for certified nursing assistants.⁸⁶

Occupational licensing is also a highly political issue. While quality and safety concerns drive many occupational licensing regulations, licensing boards—and to a greater extent, professional associations—may have incentives to reduce professional competition. Professional associations often lobby aggressively to keep certain requirements in place or to implement new ones, whether or not such rules improve consumer safety.⁸⁷ Testimony cited in the Little Hoover Commission report notes, for example, that professional associations successfully lobbied to remove foreign-trained dentists' option to obtain state licensure by passing an exam. Now, dentists in the state who attended a foreign program not explicitly approved by the Dental Board of California must pay an average of \$150,000 to enroll in a two-year "advanced-standing" dental program in order to relicense. Only one foreign dental program is currently approved by the Dental Board of California and only a limited number of U.S. schools offer

83 California Workforce Development Board, "Workforce Accelerator Fund 4.0 Awards" (award announcement, California Workforce Development Board, Sacramento, CA, 2017), <https://cwdb.ca.gov/files/2017/01/WAF-4.0-Web-Announcement-Draft-dv.pdf>; California Workforce Development Board, "Workforce Accelerator Fund 3.0 Awards" (award announcement, California Workforce Development Board, Sacramento, CA, 2016), http://cwdb.blogs.ca.gov/files/2016/08/Accelerator_3.0_FINALWeb_Announcementjh060716.pdf.

84 Adam B. Summers, *Occupational Licensing: Ranking the States and Exploring Alternatives* (Los Angeles: Reason Foundation, 2007), <http://reason.org/files/762c8fe96431b6fa5e27ca64eaa1818b.pdf>.

85 Little Hoover Commission, *Jobs for Californians: Strategies to Ease Occupational Licensing Barriers* (Sacramento, CA: Little Hoover Commission, 2016), www.lhc.ca.gov/studies/234/Report234.pdf.

86 Ibid.

87 Little Hoover Commission, *Jobs for Californians*; Patricia Cohen, "Moving to Arizona Soon? You Might Need a License," *The New York Times*, June 17, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/06/18/business/economy/job-licenses.html.



the advanced-standing programs foreign dentists trained in other programs would need to complete to practice in California.⁸⁸

Across the country, the wide array of complex and sometimes unnecessary licensing regulations has attracted significant attention in recent years due to its adverse effects on consumers as well as specific sub-groups of the working population (e.g., veterans, military spouses, ex-offenders, and foreign-trained immigrants). For example, a 2013 report entitled *The Fast Track to Civilian Employment: Streamlining Credentialing and Licensing for Service Members, Veterans, and Their Spouses*, prepared by the National Economic Council and the President's Council of Economic Advisors, provided momentum to calls for reform of unnecessarily rigid licensing regulations that hinder veterans' and military spouses' employment in civilian occupations.⁸⁹ However, while these and other efforts have brought important national visibility to these issues and contributed to creation of the Occupational Licensing Review and Portability Grant, difficult work remains to be done at the state level, where political will and tenacity are needed to tackle most licensing reform challenges.

The wide array of complex and sometimes unnecessary licensing regulations has attracted significant attention in recent years.

The longstanding powers of state licensing boards are also being questioned in the wake of a successful complaint in 2011 that challenged efforts by the North Carolina Board of Dental Examiners to shut down nondentist teeth whitening businesses.⁹⁰ The case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which found that the board was not immune to federal antitrust challenges. The court's 2015 ruling has prompted new scrutiny of the composition and broad authorities granted to many such boards, providing fuel for review of regulatory designs and practices that may result in the stifling of legitimate market competition.

Effective programs often cannot achieve economies of scale. The obstacles each highly educated immigrant or refugee faces—whether English language and literacy, education gaps, or relicensing challenges—are fairly unique. Coupled with the great variation between state- and industry-specific requirements, immigrant professionals' needs can often only be met when local institutions offer highly specific courses regardless of the small number of individuals who may enroll. These barriers to scale pose structural challenges for adult English or other education programs, since classes generally require a certain level of enrollment in order to support a teacher's salary.

Career re-entry services are a poor fit for existing funding streams. The unique needs of foreign-trained individuals for credential recognition, relicensing, and other supports are often a poor fit for the service designs on which most education and training programs are modeled. Most standard programs essentially provide a single block of instructional content or training to participants, usually over the

88 Only De La Salle School of Dentistry in Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico has been approved by the Dental Board of California. And the national accrediting body for dental schools, Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), does not currently recognize any dental programs outside the U.S. and Canada. See Dental Board of California, "Full Board Meeting: Response to the Legislative Oversight Committees' Background Paper and Current Sunset Review Issues for the Dental Board of California" (issue paper, Dental Board of California, Sacramento, CA, April 27, 2015), www.dbc.ca.gov/about_us/materials/20150515mm.pdf; Little Hoover Commission, *Jobs for Californians*.

89 The White House, Executive Office of the President, *The Fast Track to Civilian Employment: Streamlining Credentialing and Licensing for Service Members, Veterans, and Their Spouses* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2013), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/military_credentiaing_and_licensing_report_2-24-2013_final.pdf.

90 Federal Trade Commission, "FTC Concludes North Carolina Dental Board Illegally Stifled Competition by Stopping Non-Dentists From Providing Teeth Whitening Services" (press release, December 7, 2011), www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2011/12/ftc-concludes-north-carolina-dental-board-illegally-stifled.



course of several months or a year, and measure outcomes using exams, skill tests, or employment results. Several key barriers highly educated individuals face—such as multi-year licensing processes and lengthy practical experience requirements—do not fit within this program design. The timeframe within which clients must demonstrate their employment and education outcomes is frequently too short for foreign-trained immigrants who are working to support their families while also building English language skills and attempting to plug other knowledge gaps. Because programs must demonstrate their clients' progress into high-skill and high-wage jobs within a year, serving immigrant students who require a longer or more flexible timeline carries the risk of appearing ineffective and, as a result, failing to maintain or compete for funding.

Effective strategies to address employer bias remain elusive. Despite efforts by organizations such as Upwardly Global and the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians to educate employers about the skills and qualifications immigrants bring with them and to assuage their concerns by prescreening foreign-trained professionals, larger-scale solutions to the problem of employer bias have proved elusive. While it may be difficult to determine whether conscious or unconscious bias played a role in the individual experiences of highly qualified immigrant or refugee job applicants, the problem appears to be widespread. Without more effective strategies to eradicate such bias, it will continue to undercut the returns on the investments highly skilled immigrants and refugees make in their careers—and that programs make in assisting.

Efforts to enhance skill mobility through reciprocity and mutual recognition agreements remain limited. One powerful tool that could ease the transition of foreign-trained immigrants into the U.S. labor market is expansion of mutual recognition agreements (MRAs), through which national governments or regulatory bodies agree to treat education or other qualifications from fellow signatories as equivalent to those earned domestically. Notable recent MRAs include those signed by Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, which cover seven occupations and are at various stages of implementation, and a 2008 Québec-France agreement that has resulted in the mutual recognition of qualifications in almost 100 occupational fields.⁹¹ The European Union also has gone to great lengths to harmonize Member State education and professional qualifications, in line with its mandate to promote free movement. Its European Qualifications Framework now provides eight “common reference levels” that enable comparison of education outcomes across EU systems,⁹² and the recently updated Professional Qualifications Directive modernizes and makes more automatic the recognition of experience and other qualifications in a range of professions.⁹³ Another MRA model is the Washington Accord—an agreement among 18 accreditation organizations in the engineering field that treats engineering degrees from each signatory country as equivalent for the purposes of graduates' licensing, registration, and employment.⁹⁴

However, because MRAs require high levels of mutual confidence in the professional standards of other signatories and because standards and levels of equivalence must be carefully negotiated for each occupation covered, such agreements are typically limited to countries with a strong interest

91 Relations Internationales et Francophonie Quebec, “Québec-France Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of professional Qualifications,” updated July 7, 2016, www.mrif.gouv.qc.ca/en/ententes-et-engagements/ententes-internationales/reconnaissance-qualifications/entente-quebec-france.

92 European Commission, “Descriptors Defining Levels in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF),” accessed February 8, 2017, <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/content/descriptors-page>.

93 European Commission, “Single Market and Standards: Policy Developments,” accessed January 18, 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/services/free-movement-professionals/policy_en.

94 Sumption, *Tackling Brain Waste*; International Engineering Alliance, “Washington Accord,” accessed January 13, 2017, www.ieagreements.org/accords/washington/; Dovelyn Rannveig Mendoza, Maria Vincenza Desiderio, Guntur Sugiyarto, and Brian Salant, *Open Windows, Closed Doors: Mutual Recognition Arrangements on Professional Services in the ASEAN Region* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2016), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/open-windows-closed-doors-mutual-recognition-arrangements-professional-services-asean.



in establishing common regulatory requirements.⁹⁵ Within the United States, inconsistencies in state licensing practices and qualification recognition can be addressed in a similar fashion through reciprocity agreements that reduce administrative barriers that prevent licensed workers—including foreign-trained immigrants—from practicing in another state. One such agreement is the Nurse Licensure Compact, which allows RNs licensed in one signatory state to practice in other. However, only some states are members of the compact; California, Florida, Illinois, and New York—among the top states of residence for immigrants—are not members.⁹⁶

Recommendations

While foreign-trained immigrants face a number of significant barriers to re-entering skilled employment in the United States, several exceptionally successful programs have demonstrated that targeted occupational resources, expert career guidance, opportunities to build essential soft skills, and education and training tailored to fill specific gaps can all be effective in helping immigrants relicense and access middle- and high-skill jobs. However, despite recent efforts that employ these strategies to better support their integration into the skilled workforce, major obstacles remain. The following recommendations offer steps that federal agencies, state and local governments, private philanthropies, and others can take to ensure that immigrant professionals' valuable skills and experience do not go to waste.

1) Review and reform state licensing laws that impose unnecessary and undue requirements on foreign-trained immigrants.

State licensing regulations pose some of the most difficult barriers foreign-trained immigrants must overcome. Encouraging and supporting expanded efforts by key state actors to examine and remove unnecessary requirements are therefore perhaps the most direct path to achieving needed reforms. Efforts such as these are time-intensive, however, and often require vigorous political leadership if they are to engage relevant stakeholders and negotiate reforms that balance their oft competing interests. Fortunately, growing awareness of the overlap between problems facing foreign-trained immigrants and those facing other groups (e.g., veterans) will likely add urgency to calls for the reform of state licensing policies that no longer serve the public's interests; identifying these points of intersection will also broaden the pool of impacted individuals and of policy and program experts that can be tapped to offer insights and solutions.

To the extent possible, reform efforts should attempt to address barriers in multiple sectors and occupations. However, initially targeting a high-demand industry such as health care may attract support more quickly among policymakers, employers, and licensing bodies. Lessons from more narrow efforts such as these can in turn be used to inform subsequent reviews the state may undertake.

The comprehensive reviews and targeted recommendations of the Massachusetts Task Force on Immigrant Healthcare Professionals and the Minnesota Task Force on Foreign-Trained Physicians can serve as models for similar efforts in other states and other sectors. States can also look to California's 2016 Little Hoover Commission report on occupational licensing barriers, which is notable for its broad overview of how licensing regulations disadvantage numerous stakeholders across a variety of sectors and occupations; it also includes a discussion of current checks and balances in the state's legislative process for approving (and sun-setting) occupational licensing regulations. Lessons from the Occupational Licensing Review and Portability grant award program that the Department of Labor launched in 2016 should also be extremely helpful in highlighting the nature and extent of licensing

95 Sumption, *Tackling Brain Waste*.

96 National Council of State Boards of Nursing, "Nurse Licensure Compact," accessed January 13, 2017, www.ncsbn.org/nurse-licensure-compact.htm.



barriers in key states and industries, as well as practical steps that states can take to identify and reduce unnecessary regulation.

2) Increase advanced English language and bridge programming to help internationally educated immigrants top-off their skills and become licensed in the United States.

Targeted investments that increase opportunities for immigrants to obtain professional-level English skills, fill coursework gaps, or complete clinical training will accelerate their re-entry into the skilled workforce and more quickly benefit the communities in which they live. Such investments may take the form of:

- **Advanced English language instruction.** Local programs face structural challenges aggregating enough demand to finance professional-level English classes. Relatively small investments in technology-based solutions could result in free or low-cost access for highly trained learners across the country, allowing local programs to devote their scarce resources instead to individualized case management and other services that require local tailoring. The Sacramento County Office of Education, for example, has developed a free online program to help build the professional and technical English skills of individuals seeking a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) credential. This approach could be replicated for skilled immigrants training to become RNs or for those in other professions.⁹⁷ At the state level, policymakers can also look to Michigan's example and support programs that offer vocational English language classes and prepare foreign-trained immigrants to pass English language proficiency exams such as the TOEFL.
- **Bridge programming.** Programs that provide foreign-trained immigrants with an opportunity to fill gaps in their education or work experience should be expanded beyond the health care sector to address skill underutilization in a broader range of fields. These initiatives could include nontraditional service models such as the Immigrant Bridge Program—a successful two-year pilot project funded by the New York City Economic Development Corporation and designed to help college-educated immigrants access “gateway jobs” in high-growth sectors such as the accounting, health care, and STEM fields.⁹⁸ Similarly, the Welcome Back Initiative could be expanded to assist individuals in other shortage professions such as teaching, where the cultural and linguistic competence skills many foreign-trained teachers possess are also in high demand.

One possible source of investment in bridge programming is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which could play a lead role in testing and developing program models for effective refugee relicensing and qualification-recognition in a range of professions. Refugees figure prominently in debates about the recognition of education and work experience acquired abroad in part because the legislation that created the refugee program specifically mentions the need to provide supports that will help refugees rejoin their professions.⁹⁹

97 English for the Nursing Assistant, “About Us,” accessed January 5, 2017, www.cnaenglish.org/about.html.

98 New York City Economic Development Corporation, “Immigrant Bridge.”

99 The lack of support provided to, for example, Iraqi refugees seeking to re-enter their professions in the United States has been well documented. See, for example, International Rescue Committee (IRC) Commission on Iraqi Refugees, *Iraqi Refugees in the United States: In Dire Straits* (New York: IRC, 2009), www1.maine.gov/dhhs/oma/irc--report-09.pdf; *Refugee Act of 1980*, Public Law 96-212, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 94 (1980): 102–118, Sec. 102 (a), <http://uscode.house.gov/statutes/pl/96/212.pdf>.



Several national refugee resettlement agencies have played an important role in articulating the challenges facing foreign-trained professionals and in attempting to meet their needs.¹⁰⁰ Given the fact that far fewer refugees than immigrants enter the United States each year, and the strength of existing support infrastructure within the resettlement field, much could be learned from pilot programs that seek to assist refugees as they re-enter different professions and under different state regulatory frameworks. Lessons from initiatives that prove successful in helping high-skilled refugees relicense and find skilled employment could then be used to inform efforts that target other populations.

3) Expand evaluation of programs that support effective labor-market integration of high-skilled immigrants and refugees, and analysis of the elements of adult education and workforce training systems that contribute to their success.

Despite the extremely poor record workforce training programs have in serving individuals with limited English proficiency, as implementation of WIOA proceeds, service providers, local workforce boards, and state governments may undertake new or expanded efforts to serve highly trained immigrants. New language in the law that specifically notes the eligibility of individuals with degrees obtained abroad for particular services,¹⁰¹ coupled with the law's emphasis on placing individuals in high-paying jobs, could result in improved service access for foreign-trained individuals in at least some parts of the country.

Nevertheless, the poor fit of many successful programs' service design with conventional funding approaches will likely constrain service expansion in many areas. Through a focused research effort, the Departments of Labor and Education could play a critical role in improving understanding of which program designs are most effective in assisting re-entry of foreign-trained individuals into their professions. Such an effort could also examine the elements of state and local planning and contracting processes, and of performance accountability mechanisms, that contribute to the selection and success of programs serving foreign-trained immigrants.

Similarly, the Department of Labor should also evaluate and disseminate information about efforts to serve this population through the Job-Drive National Emergency Grant program and the ApprenticeshipUSA program. With states such as Idaho and Maryland already seeking to use such grants to expand programming for high-skilled immigrants, there is a unique opportunity to monitor and publicize the successes and lessons learned from these efforts.

4) Increase monitoring and technical assistance to address employer bias.

As groups working in the high-skilled immigrant integration field often underscore, even after navigating difficult recertification pathways many foreign-trained professionals are not selected for jobs due to employer bias. All employers can review their hiring processes to determine whether they unfairly disadvantage foreign-trained individuals and then take steps to ensure that everyone involved in hiring decisions has had the training and support needed to accurately assess education and work experience obtained abroad. Employers seeking to eliminate bias should also consider whether online application systems or pre-employment and personality testing tools—often used by large employers to screen applicants—disadvantage or inadvertently exclude foreign-trained jobseekers during the hiring process

100 For example, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) has created a series of recertification guides for refugees seeking to re-enter a variety of fields including health care, engineering, accounting, teaching, dentistry, pharmacy, and teaching. See Higher, "Downloadable Resources—Publications—Recertification Guides," updated January 27, 2015, www.higheradvantage.org/downloadable-resources/page/3/.

101 WIOA, Title II Sec. 203 (12).



as some service providers have claimed.¹⁰² Procedures for evaluating foreign-trained applicants can also be posted prominently on company websites along with a list of approved credential evaluation services, language testing requirements, and other relevant information about how applicants' skills and prior experience will be assessed.

Government agencies, which are often large employers in their own right, can lead by example by evaluating their own hiring practices and ensuring that human resources staff receive adequate training as well as access to technical assistance for unusual or difficult cases. In both businesses and government agencies, antidiscrimination provisions and training resources should be reviewed to ensure that they adequately address issues of implicit and explicit bias against foreign-born and foreign-trained individuals, including steps to avoid unlawful discrimination on the basis of an applicants' citizenship status.

5) Expand reciprocity and mutual recognition agreements, and support efforts to harmonize qualifications across countries, states, licensing boards, accreditation bodies, and educational institutions.

Agreements among national governments, states, or regulatory bodies that expand recognition of education and qualifications could significantly diminish some of the most intractable barriers that internationally educated immigrants face in the United States. However, because the power to regulate the education and training requirements for many occupations is dispersed across a number of entities (for example, education accreditation agencies and state licensing boards), if the various authorities do not act in concert, the potential benefits of an MRA created by one could easily be undercut by another that is not party to the agreement.

With many states facing existing and projected shortages of skilled workers ... demand for more vigorous approaches to meeting shortages is likely to grow.

While the lack of a hierarchical governance structure can certainly impede change efforts, it need not entirely suffocate them. With many states facing existing and projected shortages of skilled workers—particularly for critical positions such as teachers, primary care doctors, and dentists—demand for more vigorous approaches to meeting shortages is likely to grow. For example, state governments concerned with the short supply of dentists could lead efforts to negotiate an MRA with countries whose training is—or can be made—comparable to the preparation dentists receive in the United States. Harmonization efforts, through which U.S. educational institutions and professional associations seek to align the education levels or other professional qualifications across countries, could also be expanded. These efforts could include aligning the curriculum in a particular course of study, adopting a common set of licensure exams, or developing cross-cultural exchange programs that help participants build language skills and gain exposure to professional practice in another country—all moves that would ease the transition of foreign-professionals into high-skilled work in the United States.

¹⁰² Author interview with Benjamin Jutson, Program Manager, Colorado Welcome Back Center, by phone, May 13, 2015. See, for example, Lauren Weber and Elizabeth Dvoskin “Are Workplace Personality Tests Fair?” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2014, www.wsj.com/articles/are-workplace-personality-tests-fair-1412044257; Trish Joyce, “Personality Testing Comes to Healthcare Hiring,” *Health eCareers*, November 30, 2015, www.healthcareers.com/article/career/personality-testing-for-healthcare-job-interviews.



As a starting point, state governments could also establish or join existing systems of reciprocity, beginning perhaps in shortage occupations such as nursing. Increasing the number and scope of reciprocity agreements can give foreign-trained immigrants and other mobile professionals a level of certainty when moving from state to state that they can do so without risking their ability to practice in their chosen profession.

VI. Conclusion

Foreign-trained immigrants seeking to re-enter the skilled workforce in the United States face a diverse set of challenges that frequently delays their progress toward relicensure and traps them in low-skilled and low-wage jobs. The arduous path to re-entering skilled employment often results in a waste of their human capital. Many immigrant professionals spend years and significant financial resources in pursuit of relicensure, while others never rejoin the profession for which they were trained. In both cases, U.S. employers and local communities forgo the benefits of these professionals' skills and experience.

This is not to say that carefully scrutinizing the qualifications of foreign-trained immigrants is unjustified or that subjecting them to applicable licensing rules is unfair. On the contrary—occupational licensing rules play an important role in ensuring quality and safety in many professions. However, it is equally evident that the dispersed nature of licensing authorities and the protectionist tendencies of professional associations can lead to poorly designed and unnecessarily rigid regulations that block well-qualified individuals from re-entering their fields while serving no apparent consumer interest.

Rising to the challenge of overcoming these barriers, the organizations and programs described in this report have pioneered successful strategies to assist immigrant professionals in understanding state occupational regulations, filling gaps if necessary to meet them, and securing employment commensurate with their skills and experience. With growing attention to the adverse impacts poorly designed licensing regulations can have on veterans and military spouses, among others, the lessons these innovative program and policy reform initiatives offer are relevant both within and beyond the immigrant integration field.



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The Migration Policy Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic and thoughtful responses to the challenges and opportunities that large-scale migration, whether voluntary or forced, presents to communities and institutions in an increasingly integrated world.

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