ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES:
THE MARYLAND, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, AND VIRGINIA AREA

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Executive Summary

U.S. federal refugee policy and the intersections with higher education inform the education pathways of displaced individuals. While refugees bring significant skills and experiences, the lack of focus on higher education often results in the underutilization of those skills. A constellation of individuals and organizations is central to the resettlement process. Of these, resettlement agencies, including the staff and volunteers who advance these organizational missions, are cornerstones in the information and resources that recently resettled individuals have access to. Through a Community Engaged Research (CEnR) collaboration with Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA), this work answers three interlocking questions surrounding displaced individuals' experiences.

To understand these pathways to higher education from multiple vantage points, this project draws from four distinct data sources. Qualitative interviews (n=22) and focus groups (n=82) were conducted with LSSNCA program participants and staff, as well as state partners. This research is complemented with data collected through resource mapping exercises conducted with displaced individuals and LSSNCA staff and a survey administered to 42 displaced individuals. Finally, we add data on the state's higher education landscape to contextualize the differences in program participant experiences across Virginia and Maryland. From this data, a suite of themes and recommendations emerge.

Key Questions
1. What are the pathways to higher education entry among displaced learners?
2. What are the barriers to higher education among displaced learners in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia?
3. What steps (e.g., programmatic, policy, communication, knowledge sharing, budget allocation, etc.) are needed to enhance access to higher education among this group?
4. What is the role of policy advocacy (local, state, federal, agency, college/university, etc.) in advancing pathways to higher education?
Summary of Key Findings

Financial Barriers and Opportunities

Upon resettlement, individuals face multiple competing financial priorities; these are pronounced for people in the DMV area who face higher costs in rent, transportation, food, and other basic needs. This financial precarity is foundational to individuals’ perception of whether higher education is an opportunity for them. Thus, even once individuals address some of the hurdles around understanding U.S. higher education, program participants see education as being in conflict with their basic needs.

Information Access

The decentralized nature of U.S. higher education results in an uneven information landscape. Participants indicated that they lacked an understanding of the scholarships and financial resources that are available to those interested in pursuing higher education. While they might look to social media or institutional websites, this information may not translate across state lines or institutions. LSSNCA staff may not have the resources or expectation to advise program participants on higher education programming, as it is not part of how they are evaluated.

English Language Skills

Strong English language proficiency is important not only to navigating U.S. society but to continuing their educational pursuits. A significant number of participants in the current project were highly educated Afghans coming to the U.S. with advanced English language skills. While these refugees possess a variety of skills and valuable experience in their areas, some still feel as though they fall short in the U.S. education system due to their lack of academic-level English proficiency.

Recertification & Degree Evaluation

Many refugees want to resume the life they had back in their country of origin. While participants hope for a seamless system, the refugees in this study have all noted having difficulties restarting their educational journeys and professional careers due to challenges evaluating and recertifying their degrees/educational credentials from their country of previous study.

Mentorship

The uneven landscape meant that particularly recently resettled program participants needed increased social networks in order to facilitate their higher education pathways. Program participants underscore the importance of mentorship. Formal mentoring, informal mentoring, as well as more near-peer mentoring actively push against the structures that served as barriers to higher education.

The Role of Policy

The experiences and opportunities of displaced persons are shaped by the broader structures of the resettlement agencies and higher education. Staff and program participants note that the challenges they encounter are part of a larger bureaucratic problem of refugee resettlement and the high levels of state variation U.S. In sum, diverse higher education policies make access across regions vastly different.
Recommendations
DRAWING FROM THESE FINDINGS WE PRESENT SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

**Cultural Orientation Module for Higher Education**
Building on existing modules, cultural orientation classes addressing U.S. higher education and how to navigate the educational system would address some of the gaps in information. This module could be part of the initial cultural orientation, but would also be a resource that LSSNCA staff to share with program participants, positioning LSSNCA as an exemplar of innovation with this modified orientation.

**Dedicated Higher Education & ESL Staff**
Identify an office or personnel at LSSNCA in charge of information relating to refugees and higher education in order to address confusion regarding U.S. higher education. The person would be responsible for educational information related to college and universities, non-profits, state resources, and government services that are supportive of various higher education pathways.

**Higher Education Mentoring Program**
Mentorship programs, both formal and informal, could be developed in partnership with local colleges to connect students, alumni, and professors, to guide program participants through the application and admissions process. This may be complemented by an intentional partnership with the local area nonprofits and community groups that do similar work around college mentoring.

**Advanced English Lessons**
While many participants have learned basic English before moving to the US, they are uncomfortable using English in an academic setting. Targeted academic English classes through partnerships with local community colleges and 4-year institutions may facilitate more successful integration into the post-secondary environment.

**Coalition to Address Recertification**
The need to assist program participants with the hurdle of recertifying documents and entering the workforce and education was a salient theme across all of the data detailed above. A solution might incorporate strategic partnerships with resettlement agencies, non-profits, and higher education; LSSNCA can pilot and fully scale a streamlined process.

**Establish a Workgroup**
An ongoing higher education working group, bringing together LSSNCA leadership, higher education partners, resettlement partners, and program participants is needed to sustain this work. This working group can be central to sustaining several of the goals, noted above, while also identifying new areas of advocacy and programming necessary to enhance higher education access.

**Resources Repository**
An information hub can consolidate resources for program participants. This resource hub could keep up-to-date information on the local higher education programs. This recommendation would build off of the existing CAB efforts.
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The opinions expressed in this report are entirely the authors' and do not represent the views of the University of Maryland, Baltimore, Institute for Translational Research.

**Media Inquiries**

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**Author Bios**

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Kerri Evans, MSW, Ph.D., LCSW, is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, where her research focuses on agency-engaged projects related to the well-being of immigrants. Much of the research focuses on immigrants within the context of the U.S. educational system and ways we can establish a sense of welcome for new immigrant families. Kerri is a licensed social worker and she previously worked in nonprofits with immigrant and refugee children.

Lisa Unangst, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of Higher Education at the Empire State University. Lisa’s research focuses on how displaced learners access and experience higher education, comparative constructions of "diversity" and "equity" across higher education institutions and systems, and international alumni affairs. Previously, Lisa worked at Ohio University and Ghent University.

Rahat Khpalwak has a background in Sociology and holds a MSC in Gender and Women Studies. He is a dedicated professional with over seven years of experience leading and contributing to complex projects, research consultancies and assessments. He is highly experienced in the monitoring and evaluation of national, international, rural, and urban humanitarian relief and development projects, livelihood and refugee resettlement programs. He worked with pioneering development actors in Afghanistan and is currently working as Director of Performance and Quality Improvement (PQI) with LSSNCA.
INTRODUCTION

For decades, refugee resettlement agencies have worked to advance self-sufficiency, placing refugees into low-wage, low-skilled jobs because these jobs can be done without significant English language proficiency, educational backgrounds, or specific skills. In today’s global refugee crisis, many refugees coming to the United States are highly educated and worked in professional careers before arrival. While federal policy supports pathways to jobs, it has not historically considered the role of higher education in achieving a long-term sustainable career. Because of the lack of focus on higher education pathways, the skills and talents of displaced individuals are underutilized following resettlement. Despite the significant skills and experiences that refugees bring to the U.S., these individuals often face hardship in attending and completing degrees at higher education institutions (HEI) after resettlement in the U.S. Some of these hardships include financial barriers and logistical difficulties, such as lacking proof of academic credentials or English language proficiency. Moreover, those refugees holding higher education degrees find it very difficult to have those degrees recognized in the U.S. setting.

Resettlement agencies are a critical element of the refugee resettlement process. These organizations, and the staff and volunteers who support them, shape the information and resources that individuals who are resettling have access to. This includes what and how information about higher education is shared with refugees. There is a scarcity of research that focuses on displaced learners, and HEIs rarely consider displaced students in their equity agendas. To parse the inequities facing displaced learners, this project centers the perspective of refugees and other displaced persons alongside resettlement agency staff. This project used a Community Engaged Research (CEnR) model in partnership with Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA), a resettlement agency operating in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, to answer the research questions presented below. Situating the perspectives of refugees alongside resettlement staff presents a rich description of the opportunities and barriers facing displaced individuals as they work to access higher education.

LSS is supporting us in many ways, we want them to do the same in our education part as well. If they’re providing food, housing, and other things, that’s good. Yeah, we appreciate that, but education, it’s something that’s like what professor said, every person needs [education].

1) Naylor, 2021
2) Casellas Connors et al., 2023; Evans & Unangst, 2020
3) Felix, 2020; Streitwieser et al., 2020; Unangst & de Wit, 2021
COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD

As part of the CEnR model, the research team worked in collaboration with LSSNCA staff to recruit a CAB. Researchers met with 15 interested individuals, and recruited 9 CAB members, along with one LSSNCA staff member who agreed to be the point of contact for the researchers. CAB members met roughly once per month from November 2022 through August 2023 for this project, and were compensated for their time.

The researchers want to extend a sincere thank you to all of the CAB members for sharing their ideas and time on this project. They provided important insight and helped carry out key tasks to increase access to higher education for refugees.

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**KEY DEFINITIONS & ABBREVIATIONS**

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**Displaced Learner (students)**
A student who was enrolled or eligible for enrollment in higher education but has enrolled in another place because their educational goal has been disrupted. These learners may hold a range of legal statuses, including refugee, parolee, asylee, and Temporary Protected status holder.

**In-State Tuition**
A student eligible for a lower tuition rate at a public institution, having met state-specific guidelines for residency.

**Refugee**
Someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country or origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership or a particular social group or political opinion.

**Higher Education or Postsecondary Education**
The range of formal learning opportunities beyond high school, including those aimed at learning an occupation or earning an academic credential. This wide range of institutions, such as colleges and universities, community colleges, and vocational and technical schools, provide study beyond secondary education.

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**Common Abbreviations**

- English as a Second Language (ESL)
- Community Advisory Board (CAB)
- Community Engaged Research (CEnR)
- Higher Education Institutions (HEI)
- Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA)
- Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)
- English Language Learner (ELL)
- Voluntary Agency (VOLAG)
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Temporary Protective Status (TPS)
- Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)
- Literacy Council of Northern Virginia (LCNV)

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4) National Center for Education Statistics
5) Institute of Education Sciences
6) Department of Education; Education Data Initiative
7) Migration Policy Institute; The UN Refugee Agency
BACKGROUND

Landscape of U.S. Higher Education

Higher education in the U.S. operates through a complex web of federal and state policies. At the state level, public higher education institutions provide important pathways for education access through certificate, associate’s, and bachelor’s-level programs. Public institutions represent an economically accessible option, with the average cost of attending a public 4-year institution significantly lower than that of a private institution\(^8\). Among immigrants and other displaced populations, open-access community colleges are important sites for education access\(^9\). These institutions provide ESL, academic, and technical programs that have the potential to support displaced learners. However, variation in the cost of attendance and access to in-state tuition is a concern. Policies like HB 1179 explicitly offer in-state tuition for refugees in Virginia (§ 23.1-506), while Maryland also offers displaced people access to ESL courses at community colleges for a reduced rate\(^10\). Thus, as the number of immigrants, refugees, and other displaced learners has increased, the higher education system has been forced to innovate services for this growing population, and different institutions have developed different mechanisms.

The Role of Resettlement Agencies

Resettlement agencies are the linchpins of the refugee resettlement process and serve refugees as well as other displaced people. They can be important pathways and gatekeepers, and as such, their partnership and local networks can be critical in shaping the opportunities available to their clients. Resettlement agencies provide a variety of services, including home furnishings and basic needs upon arrival, case management for the first 90 days after arrival, and cultural orientation for newcomers. The main goal of this federally funded resettlement program (Reception and Placement) is for program participants to reach self-sufficiency through employment in 90 days. After the initial resettlement period, there is additional programming that can help refugees access employment assistance. Some resettlement agencies have additional grants (through ORR or other funders) to cover other common programming, which might include extended case management for families with significant needs, legal assistance, foster care for refugee unaccompanied minors and unaccompanied children, school impact grants, mentoring programs, specific programming for immigrant groups, and many more. During periods of significant refugee inflows, resettlement agencies work to build cohort-based programs supporting large groups of recently displaced people. These programs include disparate activities related to education, lacking a clear focus on undergraduate or graduate educational attainment.

Higher Education & Resettlement

Research on the U.S. policy landscape points to the lacuna of federal policy that intentionally foregrounds displaced learner\(^11\). Yet, a skilled workforce is noted as central to the cultivation of a thriving economy and a key tool for the establishment of an economically sustainable employment pathway. Instead, we must look to states which place varying degrees of attention on displaced learners. Unangst and colleagues\(^12\) found that in states with the largest percentage of refugees per capita, policy documents were largely silent as related to displaced learners. Importantly, those policies provided limited access to in-state tuition and simultaneously constructed bureaucratic exemption programs that may present as accessible but perpetuate an administrative burden in order to access higher education. In turn, limited research has engaged with refugee resettlement agencies to understand their central role in the pursuit of higher education among displaced learners.

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8) Ma et al., 2016; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2019
9) Luu & Blanco, 2021
10) MORA, n.d.; Unangst et al., 2022
11) Luu & Blanco, 2021
12) Unangst et al., under review
Once students enroll, there are organizational and institutional factors that constrict student success at the higher education level. Perry and Mallozzi\textsuperscript{13} identified a misalignment between refugee needs and the needs perceived by HEI stakeholders as central to this barrier. Community college, often the first destination for displaced students, often funnel displaced students into ESL classes, obscuring the nuance within this student population\textsuperscript{14}. Once in ESL, students face compounding structural challenges as ESL classes restrict access to larger institutional and community knowledge that facilitates success in higher education. Beyond ESL tracking, students face resource constraints and advising that construct a deficit outlook on displaced learners\textsuperscript{15}. Community-based organizations also play an essential role in producing asset-based frameworks and can build pathways for displaced learners\textsuperscript{16}.

Outside of the barriers, research has found several programmatic and structural elements that are beneficial for refugee and other immigrant populations. Building expansive programs for immigrant and refugee students, including the production of recruitment collateral in multiple languages, serves as a gateway for access. Further, state policies, such as those that foreground collaboration to support refugees, have the potential to support displaced learners\textsuperscript{17}. In sum, the existing literature on student success, refugee resettlement, and higher education reflects that student-level, support-staff level, and institutional-level research is needed to probe processes of change around learners seeking rapid access to college or university shortly after arrival.

\textsuperscript{13} Perry & Mallozzi, 2011
\textsuperscript{14} Huerta, Garza, & García, 2019
\textsuperscript{15} Kanno & Varghese (2010); Suh et al. (2022); Suárez-Orozco et al., 2021
\textsuperscript{16} Yi & Kiyama, 2018
\textsuperscript{17} Casellas Connors et al., 2023
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the pathways to higher education entry among displaced learners?
- What are the barriers to higher education among displaced learners in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia?
- What steps (e.g., programmatic, policy, communication, knowledge sharing, budget allocation, etc.) are needed to enhance access to higher education among this group?
- What is the role of policy advocacy (local, state, federal, agency, college/university, etc.) in advancing pathways to higher education?

DATA COLLECTION

In the section below, we provide an overview of the four data sources that informed this report. For additional information on the data collection measures, see Appendix 1.

Interviews

In order to address research questions, we engaged in qualitative interviews with LSSNCA 22 current staff across multiple roles as well as with key partners with the broader refugee resettlement community in Maryland and Virginia (see Table 1 for additional details). Staff and key partners were invited to one-on-one interviews that occurred either in person or via Zoom (see Appendix A for interview guides). Staff and key partners were asked about their perceptions of how individuals access higher education, the programs in place at LSSNCA and beyond, and how they understood barriers for program participants.

Focus Groups

We engaged in focus groups with 82 program participants, past and present, from LSSNCA. Program participants were invited to a 60-90-minute focus group (see Table 1 for additional details). Of the 10 focus groups, eight were conducted in person, where participants were invited to the LSSNCA offices (Fairfax, Greenbelt, and Woodbridge) or other local venues. Two of the focus groups were conducted virtually via Zoom. Focus group participants were asked to reflect on their lived experiences, educational aspirations, and their experiences accessing higher education once they were resettled (see Appendix B for focus group guides).

Combined, these interviews and focus groups produced over 25 hours of data. These data were then organized and coded to identify common patterns and themes. Preliminary findings were then shared with the Community Advisory Board (CAB) for thought and reflection.

Resource Mapping

The research team conducted two resource mapping sessions. First, the CAB engaged in a 90-minute reflective community resource mapping exercise. The objectives of that process were to identify resources that are currently available, consider how those resources are currently being used, address gaps, and consider areas of connection moving forward (see Appendix C for a full list of resource mapping prompts).
At the conclusion of each session, the researchers digitally summarized each participant’s response. The CAB participants were invited to reflect on their responses as well as provide additional responses they may have omitted during the in-person sessions. These initial findings from the CAB and staff resource mapping were placed alongside one another to consider the similarities and differences between these two groups.

Survey

After the CAB members reviewed the findings of the staff interviews and focus groups, they wanted to seek more information to ensure that the CAB’s work would be beneficial to as many refugees as possible. Therefore, they created a 10-question survey (plus demographic questions), which was distributed among resettlement program participants, CAB networks, and broadly within the local community (see Appendix D for survey questions). Importantly, the survey sought to understand not only the experiences of respondents but also provide insights into the needs, including programmatic initiatives, that would support their access to higher education.

The survey distribution yielded 43 people completing the online survey. Of these, 79.1% (n=34) identified as male, 83.7% (n=36) were from Afghanistan, and most had advanced (44.2%, n=19) or intermediate (51.2%, n=22) English proficiency. Survey data was analyzed to identify common needs among survey participants.

State Programs & Policies

To contextualize the needs and resources available to displaced learners in the region, we systematically gathered data on existing programs and policies that might be relevant. Specifically, we looked at state workforce development programs, K-12 and higher education policies, and new immigrant programming, all of which present potential programs that can benefit refugee and displaced populations. To complete this phase of data collection, we began by looking at the state agency websites (e.g., workforce development, higher education, health, and human services) to identify relevant programs and resources that may be available to refugees and other displaced persons.

These four complementary strands of data were used as the anchor for the themes shared below. Specifically, we considered how different organizational members see the barriers and opportunities to accessing postsecondary education. By considering the state-wide programming and policy landscape, we can situate these perspectives within the broader higher education backdrop.
An Interlaced Web of Barriers: Finances and Information

Financial Barriers and Opportunities

Upon resettlement, individuals face multiple competing financial priorities - these are pronounced for people in the DMV area who face higher costs in rent, transportation, food, and other basic needs. This financial precarity is foundational to individuals' perception of whether higher education is an opportunity for them - 70% of survey respondents indicated that finance barriers were a hindrance to their higher education. Upon resettlement, individuals face multiple competing financial priorities - these are pronounced for people relocating to the DMV area. As people navigate the significant cost of living - including elements like rent, transportation, and food - many are also working to support family that was recently displaced or living in their home country. As one participant noted, "I have to pay for rent. I have to pay for a car. I have to pay for everything. Basically, whatever I'm earning is zero."

Navigating these basic needs becomes a primary focus and is also important in framing participants' perspectives on higher education as a viable pathway, given the constraints of life, "Our mind is busy because of rent, food, right now we don't have SNAP for food, we don't have rent. We came out of camp ourselves." Thus, the structural and financial barriers enacted through a U.S. system that provides limited financial support shape the daily lived experiences of the program participants. Even those that feel they are in a place to think about education post resettlement see education in conflict with their basic needs.

Considering the intersection of life and school, "So I'm working every hour, $18 an hour, eight hours. I'm working full-time. My wife is working nighttime Amazon. She's studying in the daytime. I have to pay for the daycare .... I have to pay for rent." School becomes another element increasing the financial precarity in which participants operate. The refugee participants from Afghanistan, like many, recognized the cost-prohibitive nature of US higher education that made studying feel inaccessible. Further complicating this circumstance were questions of how and where to access higher education. As another Afghan participant noted, "The university is not in your hometown, and you have to move to another hometown, so you need to rent an apartment, and go and spend it by yourself, and then get into it, get adapted to you being on your own, providing for yourself, and all, paying bills." In this process, the dream of higher education is stifled by the reality of the financial landscape and the lack of scholarships and other financial resources. Thus, the distinct nature of how people imagine accessing higher education, high-cost tuition, and the role of finances as they navigated these potential pathways to higher education in the U.S. presents an initial barrier to thinking about higher education.

"We do have families. We have to support them and at the same time education fees are so high here."
Information Access

The decentralized nature of U.S. higher education results in an uneven information landscape. Participants indicated that they lack an understanding of the scholarships and financial resources that are available to those interested in pursuing higher education. While they might look to social media or institutional websites, this information may not translate across state lines or institutions. Alternatively, participants who had lived in the U.S. longer relied on the broader social networks that they had cultivated, including the tools to navigate the labyrinth of U.S. education bureaucracy. A participant noted, “You have to ask someone [for] consultation ... because we don’t know anything when we can be like. We know nothing. I really, I need someone to concept like to give me an advice to tell me what to do, what to do next.” As focus group participants seek out knowledge on higher education programs, they begin to realize that opportunities are not found as easily as they thought. While this is due to a variety of factors, many people felt that it would be better to get this information primarily through their case managers. Participants shared that they get their information from various sources but not from their case managers due to their huge workload. “Another thing is that the case managers are very busy, so they can’t all read our email regularly...but I don’t blame them because the workload is very big for them.” This participant grasped that the LSSNCA staff is serving a vast number of refugees who arrive from every corner of the world and are, therefore, not available to answer all of their questions. From a policy standpoint, we also acknowledge that access to higher education is not currently an aspect of the refugee resettlement program (per ORR’s cooperative agreement), and therefore, case managers do not have the resources or the expectation to advise clients on higher education programming; it is not part of how they are evaluated.

Beyond general information, advising on issues regarding higher education is limited. Even those who do access higher education may find their path long and circular based on the lack of information. Participants identified the importance of equitable information dissemination in deterring them from accessing a gateway to a prosperous future in the U.S. post-resettlement. Importantly, mentorship programs exist at many of the community partners that LSSNCA refers to; however, those programs differ dramatically in scope, training for mentors, etc.

“The main challenges, in my opinion, actually, based on my experience, lack of knowledge at the first time when they came here. If they have a full knowledge of the system, the education system, higher education system, and workplace, everything, they will be very successful. They know which pathway they should choose. But even after years, still due to lack of information and misguidance, some people ... They lose their time.”
Post-Secondary Pathway Options and Walls

**English Language Skills**

In order to navigate their new environment, refugees are required to learn the language of the country they are settling into. This barrier is a priority that newcomers need to address before pursuing their educational goals, as many see themselves setting in the U.S. for a long time. As a participant said: "...for us, we haven't thought about education yet, because we have a language barrier, just because we learned the language, as soon as we learn the language, we will try to dig more into the educational field, because I do plan to stay probably over here." Their prior knowledge of the English language is important not only to navigating American society but to continuing their educational pursuits.

The lack of English skills is a common issue among refugees; however, as described below, the participants in the current project were highly educated Afghans coming to the U.S. with advanced English language skills. Their backgrounds ranged from business administration, medicine, education, law, etc., both in the field and pursuing higher education. While these refugees possess a variety of skills and valuable experience in their areas, some still feel as though they fall short in the U.S. education system due to their lack of academic-level English accuracy. "But for those who can't speak English properly... There will be maybe 10% or 5% of the young generation who know English. English is one of the biggest challenges for us. Specifically, to go [to the university]. Even I don't trust my English when I speak now to go and pursue my PhD or go for a master’s degree, you have to have good English." In spite of the fact that many of the participants have knowledge of basic English, they understand that their abilities are not sufficient to continue their education in the U.S. The survey data indicated that 46% of respondents wanted assistance with Advanced English Language Classes since basic knowledge of the English language is not enough to navigate higher education. The resource mapping pointed to the importance of ESL programming and the resources available to program participants. While the CAB members highlighted ESL classes, LSSNCA staff more frequently highlighted the role of ESL classes, foregrounding the role of multiple NGOs (e.g., Catholic Charities or LCNV) and higher education (e.g., George Mason University, NOVA) institutions in offering ESL programs.
Recertification and Degree Evaluation

Many refugees want to resume the life they had in their country of origin here in the U.S., both in their educational journeys and finding a job that matches their degree/work experience from their home country. Unfortunately, many people find that the process is not as seamless as they thought. The refugees in this study all noted having difficulties restarting their educational journeys and professional careers due to problems evaluating and recertifying the degrees/educational credentials from their home country. Of the survey participants, over 50% indicated that degree accreditation was an important barrier to their higher education pathway. This was underscored by LSSNCA staff observations such as, “[a] problem would be the evaluation of their documents. For example, I know some refugees has studied, let's say, they have their bachelor's degree or master's degree in Afghanistan. But when they arrive in here, somehow, they're lost. ‘Where I should start? How can I evaluate my certificate, diploma?’”

Prior expectations about continuing their educational pursuits are shattered after realizing the difficulties associated with degree evaluation and recertification. “I studied for 18 years to pursue the medical field. Why is it that my credentials cannot be accepted here in America? I'm just any other doctor. Why do I have to go through all these different hurdles? Why can't I just be able to join the medical work, do what I was doing? So I think people can also get discouraged, and that could also have an impact on them pursuing higher education, and then whereas others are more motivated, but I think just when they realize that their credentials don’t necessarily mean much, for some, it may be easier, but for others, it’s a bit of a challenge being able to use their previous credentials or qualifications, to opposed to employment and studies here.” As such, prior higher education does not always serve to enable post-secondary pathways; instead, it serves as a significant barrier for many.
Mentorship

The focus group and survey data highlight the importance of mentorship, in many different forms, as a mechanism for decreasing barriers to higher education and meaningful employment. Survey participants noted that mentorship would support their access to post-secondary education. Participants indicate multiple mechanisms for mentorship, formal and informal, as organizational structures that would facilitate individual success. The need for multiple forms of mentorship, both direct mentoring, indirect mentoring, as well as more near-peer mentoring, in order to actively push against the structures that served as barriers to higher education. The survey data indicated that 22 of the 43 participants (51.2%) would like a mentor to guide them through the process. More specifically, participants noted that they wanted assistance writing the college entrance essay/statement of purpose (46.5%), needed assistance with the application process (46.5%), and wanted connections to higher education institutions, alumni, and professors (65.1%).

When asked to reflect on what would support their higher education pathways, program participants in the focus groups affirmed the need for mentorship opportunities. At its most basic level, suggested, “I think you should mentor, then to go to be able to go to the relevant education program.” Articulating the value and rationale for such a program, a program participant noted many people simply lack connections. This uneven landscape meant that particularly recently resettled program participants needed increased social networks in order to facilitate their higher education pathways. Program participants underscore the importance of mentorship, aimed at assessing program participant needs and aligning the needed resources and networks, without which program participants will continue to face significant barriers.

The Role of Policy

The experiences and opportunities of displaced persons are shaped by the broader structures of the resettlement agencies, including the federal and state policy landscapes in which they operate. LSSNCA staff, many of them refugees themselves, highlight the complexity of what it means to support program participants interested in pursuing higher education. As LSSCNA staff ponder over the specific changes that they wish to see, many of them cannot help but note that the issues the program participants and staff themselves encounter are part of a larger bureaucratic problem of how the U.S. interacts with refugees. The constant barriers encountered by the program participants have connections to the political system that is supposed to aid them in integrating into the U.S. There were two major systems that staff have identified that complicate refugees’ abilities to fully integrate into the system as they work together: higher education and immigration/resettlement policy. Specifically, federal
Higher education policies vary by state in the U.S., making access across regions vastly different for refugee groups. The structural barriers entrenched by federal and state policies lack transparency regarding accessing funding. Additionally, staff also find that their ability to access financial assistance is difficult due to their refugee status. “... And she was talking about exploring education like, you know, opportunities for higher education. And then she said but the cost is a major problem. I've had a discussion because we don't really understand [the] financial aid system and what I've come to understand is that I'm gonna find myself paying that and I don't wanna be paying like 10,000.” As one participant noted, “My family, like my husband, cousin and some relatives are right now in California and they want to study and to study, they even get paid like a salary... I said okay, I prefer Virginia...Why not for this state? Why they are not helping us here? We do not expect them to give us money. We want them to give us ESL classes and some opportunities to continue our field of studies.”

LSSNCA staff also noted the challenges in accessing clear and timely information about higher education pathways for program participants. While staff had some understanding of the higher education landscape (many of them are refugees themselves and may not have attended college in the U.S.), there is not a uniform mechanism for acquiring that information through training or professional development, and key points of contact are not available to address individual concerns. Thus, since higher education access is not core to federal refugee resettlement policy and the needs of refugees are not clearly addressed by institutions of higher education, the ability to support learners is largely constricted.

These findings, which reflect the multiple strands of data collected throughout this project, serve to both affirm our existing assumptions about refugee access to U.S. higher education and present new views on this experience. Drawing from this, we present some of the recommendations and activities that are derived from these data.
RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we draw recommendations from LSSCNA and community member interviews, focus group participants, and survey data to point to steps to enhance higher education opportunities among refugees and other displaced learners. Some of these have been launched by the CAB, as detailed below, while others will require many additional partners.

Create a Cultural Orientation Module for Higher Education

Interviews and focus groups asked for cultural orientation classes focused on navigating the educational system. Participants expressed the importance of making sure refugees are accustomed to U.S. culture. To begin with, “The first thing that they [program participants] should learn and should go through is the culture of the United States.” This lack of understanding is further complicated by an unclear education system. As a participant noted, “I think there are many challenges because when you see the system in Afghanistan, their education system isn’t like the system in America, so it’s a big difference.”

Recommendation: Cultural orientation classes should include information on how to find English classes as well as an overview of the educational system in the U.S., including higher education. This module could be part of the initial cultural orientation, but it would also be a resource that LSSNCA staff can share with program participants when they are ready to consider higher education.

Long term, there is the opportunity to spread this module to all resettlement agencies.

Designate a Staff Person Dedicated to Higher Education and ESL

LSSNCA can develop an office or dedicate personnel to be in charge of information relating to higher education. Refugee participants expressed confusion in how to apply for admission to institutions of higher education as well as the various types of financial aid programs. This person or office would be a source for information related to colleges and universities, non-profits, state resources, and government services that can assist with the array of higher education pathways, including recertification and degree valuation processes and information for those who want to resume their studies from their country of origin.

Why not they have a higher education liaison? So, if we have a higher education liaison, they will have point of contact in universities and public and government entities that could help.
A Repository of Resources

The participants support any sort of information hub, whether in an office or online format, that conglomerates resources for them to access. Having experienced the jungle of the U.S. education system, refugees are seeking tools and people to help them navigate their journey. The chart below showcases resources that CAB members need to help them navigate higher education.

Establish a Higher Education Mentoring Program

Participants indicated the need for mentorship programs, both formal and informal. Using best practices in other mentoring programs, LSSNCA could develop a mentorship program with local colleges, paying students, alums, and professors to guide program participants through the process. Alternatively, there are existing programs in the local area that do similar work around college mentoring, and LSSNCA could establish explicit partnerships and refer program participants to these programs (e.g., Latino Education Advancement Fund, Chesapeake Language Project; Mi Espacio at CASA; Mi Futuro Education: Making College Affordable).
Offer Advanced English Lessons

Many program participants are seeking better access to ESL courses and for them to be in multiple formats. Considering the role of ESL as a gateway to higher education, one noted the challenges with virtual classes and suggested, “I would say the best thing for them [program participants] is to start the ESL classes and community college and just make their way up from there.” While many of the refugees have learned basic English prior to moving to the U.S., they are not comfortable using English in an academic setting. Refugees with prior experience in English hope to learn academic English or English that helps in higher education endeavors noting, “You can make classes that help you with academic English, not the ESL ...So, you can make classes for those who are better.”

**Recommendation:** Offer targeted academic English classes for program participants. Foster partnerships with local community colleges and 4-year institutions that offer academic English programs, as they may facilitate more successful integration into the post-secondary environment.

Strategize and Build Coalitions to Address Recertification Needs

The need to assist program participants with the hurdle of recertifying documents and entering the workforce in their former capacity was a salient theme across all of the data. Given the critical nature of recertification and degree verification, a system-level effort to reduce barriers is necessary. Through strategic partnerships with resettlement agencies, non-profits, and institutions of higher education, LSSNCA can pilot and then fully scale a streamlined process for one degree area, which can then be used as evidence in other professional areas.

**Recommendation:** Build a coalition with resettlement agencies and higher education partners to develop targeted partnerships to facilitate recertification and degree verification.

Establish a Higher Education Working Group

In order to sustain this work, there is evidence that an established working group, bringing together LSSNCA leadership, higher education partners, resettlement partners, and program participants is needed. This working group can be central to sustaining several of the goals, noted above, while also identifying new areas of advocacy and programming necessary to enhance higher education access for program participants.

**Recommendations:** Leverage existing and emerging relationships to institutionalize a higher education access working group. This will require participation from senior leadership, higher education, program participants, and local partners in order to facilitate the ongoing implementation of best practices.
ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

As noted above, the CAB met monthly with researchers. The main function of the meetings was to process the data from the focus groups, staff/stakeholder interviews, and resource mapping to determine what actions could be taken. Based on this review of the data, the CAB and researchers have undertaken several key activities, which are described below.

Scholarship Information

The CAB resonated with the research findings regarding financial barriers to accessing higher education and felt that this was a problem they could help solve. The CAB members worked with university research assistants to understand the policies related to in-state tuition in Virginia and Maryland regarding immigrant students. They also looked into the Maryland Office of Student Financial Assistance and searched the internet for scholarships, both public and private, that immigrants are eligible for or that specifically target immigrant and refugee students.

Outcome: A list of scholarships and financial aid resources has been created that LSSNCA staff can share with program participants and can also be shared on the LSSNCA website.

Higher Education Workshops

The CAB members understand that many refugees and immigrants are apprehensive about higher education in the U.S. and want to ensure a personal touch and networking to help people consider if this is a path they should take. Therefore, they hosted a webinar and plan to host an in-person informational session where they will talk to LSSNCA program participants, staff, and other community members. In these presentations, they will 1) share information about this project, 2) share the scholarship documents, 3) provide brief highlights about the webinar and recorded videos mentioned below, and 4) engage participants in a conversation to help respond to individual concerns.

Outcome: Online and in-person workshops for program participants and others interested in pursuing higher education.

Trainings for CAB members

Based on the research, CAB members identified several areas for personal growth, in order to better serve as advocates and a resource to LSSNCA as they work to advance their support for program participants accessing higher education. Per the CAB’s request, researchers liaised with colleagues to identify two trainers in the areas of communication and advocacy.

Outcome: CAB members participated in two hour-long training sessions, administered by outside experts Christine Horansky (World Bank) and Dr. M. Nicole Belfiore (University of Maryland, Baltimore County), tailored to CAB professional development.
Higher Education Informational Videos

Collaborations are underway with local higher education partners to produce a webinar series for LSSNCA staff and program participants tailored to the concerns of immigrants and refugees regarding higher education. The series will work to answer common questions and inspire courage among those who are considering pursuing an education in the U.S. The first two sessions in the webinar series will include:

- Gustavo Minaya, Montgomery College Financial Aid Office
- Azul Romero-Rodriguez, Marquette University Class of 2024

These webinars will be recorded and then shared on the LSSNCA website. LSSNCA staff can direct program participants, both current and future, to the website when they are thinking about pursuing higher education.

Outcome: 3-5 part webinar series aimed at answering key questions about the higher education application process, with a specific focus on public higher education institutions in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.
CONCLUSION

Over the past 40 years, as the global refugee crisis has shifted, so too has the nature of work in the U.S. While historically, resettlement agencies have worked quickly to find newcomers work, which was often low wage and required limited English proficiency, the type and scope of work and resettlement has shifted. At present, many refugees entering the country are highly educated and had significant professional careers before arrival. Additionally, the economy that may have positioned the initial low-wage employment of refugees to grow into a sustainable wage no longer offers that pathway. Program participants themselves discussed the tensions between short-term employment needs and employment that leverages their skills and potential - necessitating a rethink of the traditional job pathways. As such, the current paradigm often underutilizes refugee skills and expertise. In our current knowledge economy, it is vital that resettlement agencies be empowered to rethink their role in advancing higher education access for their program participants, with the long-term goal of providing meaningful employment that offers a livable wage.

The findings from this project engaged over 100 program participants and over 22 staff and partners across LSSNCA to better understand the current barriers and opportunities facing program participants interested in accessing higher education. Through the engagement of the CAB, this data has been reviewed to present key findings and eight recommendations. These recommendations draw from the evidence to offer short- and long-term opportunities as LSSNCA works to lead the way in connecting resettlement, workforce development, and higher education.

It would be good for LSS, for the sustainable integration, education is a main pillar... So if you want to do a sustainable integration, you need education. You should support education.
RESEARCH TEAM

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A special thanks to the student researchers who assisted with this project:
- Josue Rodriguez (University of Maryland Baltimore County)
- Sofia Chunga Pizarro (Texas A&M University)
- Abdulatif Zaki (Texas A&M University)
- Talyce Murray (University of Maryland Baltimore School of Social Work)
REFERENCES


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Institutions & Organizations

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A.1.

Semi Structured Interviews (Staff and key stakeholders)

Introductory Script

Introduce Yourself and the Project: We are a team of researchers, practitioners, and ultimately, service recipients who are looking to understand higher education access for refugees, and displaced learners more broadly. We aim to better understand educational experiences and challenges among recent arrivals in the Maryland, Virginia, and District of Columbia region. Specifically, how lived experiences are informed by the political landscape, coproducing pathways for higher education pathways. This research is a collaboration with LSSNCA and will be supported by a community advisory board with program participants. Specifically, we are interested in getting your insights regarding how specific programs, policies, or practices are in place to facilitate higher education access and we are looking for your thoughts about how to improve this in the future. Over the next few months, we will establish an advisory board, continue interviewing staff, and conduct focus groups with refugees and other program participants, also we will be doing some resource mapping with staff and clients. We hope this is the first of many opportunities to talk and learn from you. Ultimately, our goal is to use this work to inform both research and practice.

Definitions: I will use the terms displaced learners and refugees throughout our discussion. We encourage you to consider both refugees, asylees, TPS holders, SIS visa holders, and any population you would consider under that broader umbrella of displaced individuals.

Process: We have three general areas of inquiry. First, to get to know a bit about your experience related to this work. Second, we are interested in learning more about the structures in place. Finally, we will invite you to envision what the future might hold and what we can do to positively enhance equitable higher education access for displaced learners.
Consent Form

- Explain the purpose of the consent form.
- Please take a minute to review the consent form and let me know if you have any questions.
  - Please know that we will not use your real name in any reports or publications that come from this research. We will provide you with a pseudonym and we will also use generic job titles to support your privacy.

TURN ON RECORDER

Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your role.
   - Probes: Populations served by organization, populations they work with
2. What are your experiences supporting refugee access to higher education in the U.S.?

Current Efforts

3. What are the common higher education pathways for individuals you work with?
   - Probes: Community college, workforce, ELL programming
4. Are their individual or state characteristics that shape those higher education pathways?
5. What challenges do refugees face when accessing higher education?
   - Probes: Differences based on education/language, finances, policy, geographic location
6. What are some of the resources available to refugees trying to access higher education?
   - Probes: Programs, funding, individuals
7. AGENCY STAFF: How do state or federal policies shape your support of refugee access for higher?
   - RESETTLEMENT DIRECTORS: How has the [specific state] state resettlement office worked to facilitate refugee access to higher education?
8. Who within the state is an advocate for refugee access to higher education?

Visions and Opportunities for the Future

9. Over the past year, how have these efforts changed? What additional changes do you think are most likely in the next year?
   - Probes: Funding, populations served, shifting challenges
10. What programs are necessary to support refugee access to higher education?
    - Probes: New programs, old programs, targeted to higher education or a component
11. Who are the important partners/stakeholders for addressing these goals?
   - Probes: Organizations, individuals, frequency of engagement, individuals' names

12. What policy changes, either state or federal, would support increased refugee access to higher education?

**Specific to State Refugee Coordinators:**

15. Are you aware of any state-wide (or regional) initiatives or collaborations across resettlement partners and institutions of higher education? (This could be in terms of access, funding, etc.)

16. Do any institutions of higher education attend the monthly networking meetings for resettlement agencies and stakeholders?

17. What might you envision as an appropriate goal or agenda in terms of increasing access to higher education for refugees in your state?

**Wrap Up**

13. What other pieces of information do you think are important for us to consider as we strive to understand refugee access to higher education in this region?

14. Are there other individuals, either at [their organization] or elsewhere, that you suggest we reach out to?
A.2. Focus Group Protocol

Introductory Script

Introduce Yourself and the Project: We are a team of researchers, practitioners, and ultimately, service recipients who are looking to understand higher education access for refugees, and displaced learners more broadly. Specifically, we are excited to learn more from you about your experiences either trying to access or enrolling in higher education. Also, we want your ideas about what is working and what is not working. Our goal is to use this work to inform how we support refugee access to higher education.

We hope to hear from all of you. But it is important to know that you might have different experiences, so it is ok to share a different experience or opinion.

Also, please respect people's privacy here, what we share here stays here.

Definitions: I will use the terms displaced learners and refugees throughout our discussion. We encourage you to consider both refugees, asylees, TPS holders, SIS visa holders, and any population you would consider under that broader umbrella of displaced individuals.

Process: We have three general areas of inquiry. First, to get to know a bit about your experiences with higher education. Second, we are interested in learning more about the resources that may help you access higher education. Finally, we will invite you to envision what the future might hold and what we can do to positively enhance equitable higher education access for displaced learners.

Consent Form

- Explain the purpose of the consent form.
- Please take a minute to review the consent form and let me know if you have any questions.
  - Please know that we will not use your real name in any reports or publications that come from this research. We will provide you with a pseudonym and we will also use generic job titles to support your privacy.

TURN ON RECORDER
Introductions
1. Please introduce yourself?
   - Probes: Refugee experience, country of origin, country where you live/attend school, prior education, community experience

Higher Education Experiences
2. What has been your experience navigating higher education?
   - Probes: Programs supporting higher education access, individuals supporting higher education access
3. What type of higher education program have you been interested in accessing or enrolled in?
   - Probes: Types of programs – workforce training, community college, ESL, 4-year, etc. What institutions are students with connecting with.
4. What challenges did you have in accessing higher education?
   - Probes: Prior education, finances, refugee programs/policies, family

Higher Education Resources
5. What people or groups have been most helpful across your community in supporting access to higher education?
6. How did you learn about those programs or resources?
7. Do you think many people are aware of these programs or resources?

Visions and Opportunities for the Future
8. What programs or policies are necessary to support refugee access to higher education?
   - Probes: New programs, old programs, targeted to higher education or a component. Policy changes – either state or federal.
9. Who do you think would be important partners/stakeholders for addressing these goals?
   - Probes: Organizations, individuals, frequency of engagement, individuals names
A3. Resource Mapping Prompts

- To identify the resources (programs, people, materials, etc.) that are currently available to support refugee higher education in Maryland/Virginia/DC and more broadly across the US
- To provide documentation and/or a visual aid of what colleges/universities, government, and non-profits are doing to achieve goals related to well-being, economic self-sufficiency, and education
- To assess how resources are being used and in what capacity
- To identify gaps, overlaps, and redundancies in resources
- To identify additional resources and/or programming that may be needed
- To identify people or organizations for Ishara/Lisa/Kerri to reach out to for interviews or other information
B.1.
COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD (CAB) MEMBER JOB DESCRIPTION
November 2022-June 2023

Compensation for full participation in eight meetings: $600
Overall project goals: We aim to better understand educational experiences and challenges among displaced learners in the Maryland, Virginia, and District of Columbia region. Specifically, how lived experiences are informed by the political landscape, coproducing pathways for higher education pathways. Through our collaboration with Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA) we will examine co-developed research questions focused on: 1) What are the pathways to higher education entry among displaced learners? 2) What are the barriers to higher education in the MD/VA/DC among displaced learners? and 3) What steps (e.g., programmatic, policy, communication, knowledge sharing, budget allocation, etc.) are needed to enhance access to higher education among this group?

The Community Advisory Board (CAB) will include current and former LSSNCA clients with many different postsecondary education experiences. Members will work in partnership with LSSNCA staff, three researchers (Kerri Evans, Ishara Casellas Connors, and Lisa Unangst), and other community members. The CAB members will actively participate in meetings sharing both their own stories and what they know about their friends, family, and neighborhood in terms of higher education (college, certificate programs, technical training, ESL, etc.). CAB members will review data and policy on higher education entry among displaced (refugee, asylee, parolee, SIV) learners in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. The CAB member will play an important role in deciding what new data, policy, and projects are needed. They will work together with other CAB members to develop a project that will benefit the LSSNCA community and that is related to higher education. That project might be a survey of all community members; a website with resources (ie. scholarships); trainings on how to speak with state and federal senators about higher education issues; or something different.

Position Description
• Attends monthly 90-minute CAB meetings at an LSSNCA office location (childcare will be provided)
• Makes a commitment to participate actively in CAB work both during meetings and assigned projects between meetings. Approximately 3-5 hours per month of your time is expected.
• Volunteers for and willingly accepts assignments and completes them thoroughly and on time
• Stays informed about committee matters, prepares for meetings, and reviews/comments on minutes and reports
• Collaborates with CAB members and builds a collegial working relationship that contributes to LSSNCA mission
• Makes a commitment through June 2023 (though it may be possible that the CAB will continue beyond June, CAB members would have the option to leave the group at that point if they choose)
Please sign to indicate that you agree to commit to the terms above:=