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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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Ishara Casellas Connors, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of public service and public administration at Texas A&M University. Her research examines issues related to racial equity in U.S. higher education policy, considering several facets, including Hispanic Serving Institutions, institutional policy, and displaced learners. Dr. Casellas Connors has a diverse background in higher education administration, having previously served as Associate Director for the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University and as Assistant Dean for Diversity at Texas A&M University's College of Geosciences.

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.