



# INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ABSTRACTS

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**E**mir (not his real name) is in his early-twenties and is in his first year pursuing an associate's degree at a community college in Nebraska. Three years ago, Emir and his family were resettled in Nebraska as refugees, fleeing their home country of Iraq due to the violence brought upon by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Emir did not know any English upon arrival and spent many hours each day learning the language in order to study and find work. Upon graduation, Emir would like to work in a health science field.

Emir is just one of an unknown number of refugee students studying in colleges in Nebraska. There is no governing agency that keeps track of the numbers of refugees studying in higher education across the United States. It is estimated that a third of the 7.5 million students in community colleges come from families who migrated to the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). Yet,

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there is no information of just how many of these immigrant students are refugees, and even less is known about their educational needs in community colleges.

Upon arrival, refugees like Emir seek to attend some form of educational institution, particularly community college (Hollands, 2012). College can be a means to adapt and thrive in a new society, and can open the opportunity to immerse in the culture of their resettled communities, expand social networks, continue schooling, or learn skills for a sustainable job. Due to circumstances of forced displacement, however, refugees may have different needs in college compared to other types of immigrants. Those pursuing higher education can face many challenges. Experiences such as disrupted schooling, living in transient camps, being separated from families, and losing loved ones at war result in health and socio-emotional problems that can affect learning and adaptation (Iversen, Sveass, & Morken, 2012; Joyce, Earnest, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Stebleton, 2007; Taffer, 2010). The college experience is more overwhelming if recently-arrived refugee students are adults with limited skills and education, come from non-industrialized communities, and are expected to juggle new roles while learning English, resettling in a new country, finding a job or working, and studying at the same time (Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Joyce, et al., 2010). Refugees are also more likely to attend relatively

lower-cost community colleges than 4-year universities for their education (Hollands, 2012; Perry, 2008), as they are found to be more economically disadvantaged than other types of immigrants (Connor, 2010).

Based on the limited literature about refugee students in colleges, this abstract discusses the challenges that refugee students encounter in the community college, and the strategies that college instructors and educational leaders can use to help meet the educational needs of refugee college students. If unaddressed, problems related to culture, adjustment, language, and the lack of services specific to their educational needs can result in the non-completion of their studies and underpreparation for the workforce (Hollands, 2012; Taffer, 2010).

Recommendations for instructional leadership are grounded on validation theory (Rendón, 1994) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), which both view non-traditional and socially marginalized students as assets in the college environment. These asset-based perspectives recognize that such students already have the capacity and capital to succeed in college, but these forms of capacity and capital often go unrecognized and are in need of validation from educational agents such as instructors. From these perspectives, the instructional leader can lead efforts in creating validating and inclusive college environments where refugee students can thrive and realize their strengths and potential.

## Refugees and Immigrants

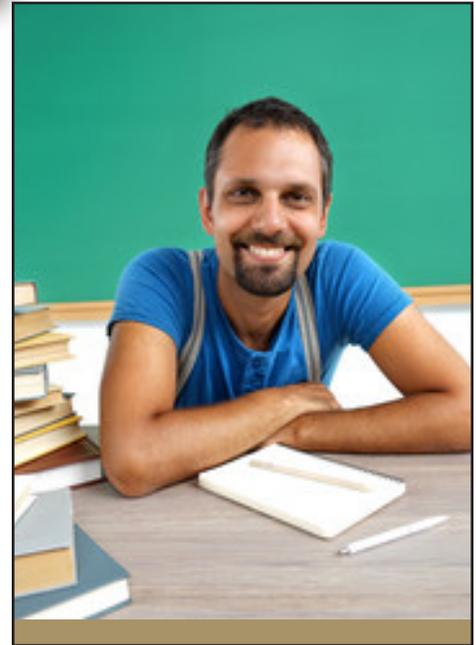
There is a tendency for the public and educational practitioners to group all foreign-born individuals together. Immigrants, by federal definition, are persons with no United States citizenship at birth, including refugees, asylum-seekers, naturalized citizens, green card holders, persons on temporary visas, and the undocumented (Nwosu, Batalova, & Auclair, 2014). Being foreign-born may be the only common characteristic among immigrants.

The main difference is choice. Immigrants, no matter what their reasons for leaving their home countries, arrive on their own volition (Segal & Mayadas, 2005). Not all immigrants are legally authorized to work, as is the case

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for undocumented immigrants, or may be eligible for the same public

benefits and services as US citizens. Refugees, on the other hand, are forcibly pushed from their home countries, due to war, violence, or some form of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership to a particular social group, or political option; and unable or unwilling to return to their home country because of such fear of persecution (UNHCR, 2011). Refugee status is a technical legal term, though in practice, the definition applies to other persons forcibly displaced from their home countries due to war, other armed conflict, and generalized violence (UNHCR, 2014), as they also experience the same traumatic experiences regardless of legal classification. The United States is a top resettlement country, admitting 84,000 refugees from African and Middle Eastern countries in 2016 (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Compared to other types of immigrants, many refugees flee with little or no planning, arrive with few or no belongings, are economically



more disadvantaged, do not choose where to resettle, and have experienced trauma due to forced displacement. Upon arrival in the U.S., refugees receive government assistance with the goal of quickly becoming self-sufficient, expecting them to learn English concurrently with vocational training, job search

## Cultural Competency of the Campus Community

Programs, services, and curricula that meet the educational needs of refugee students are designed, facilitated, and administered by faculty/instructors, administrators, and staff. Thus, key to building a responsive and conducive campus environment is the cultural competency of the campus community. Cultural competency is defined as a "dynamic ongoing, interactive, self-reflective learning process that transforms attitudes, skills, and knowledge for effective and appropriate communication and interaction across cultures" (Freeman et al., 2009, p.1). Beyond understanding ethnic cultures, cultural competency includes creating avenues for communication and providing training for faculty, staff, and administrators on cross-cultural and global awareness and student validation. Such activities are



significant in facilitating culturally-appropriate settings for conducive learning and adaptation of refugee students in higher education (Earnest et al., 2010; Perry, 2008; Reyes, 2013; Stebleton, 2007; Taffer, 2010).

Lowe (2014) provides an example of efforts undertaken to develop cultural competence among campus members at a community college in Maryland. Along with formal training in cultural competency, instructors volunteered an hour of their time each week to answer questions and talk to immigrant students about academic and personal matters.

## Teaching and Learning

### Instructors and educational leaders can address the following challenges encountered by refugee college students in the classroom:

and actual employment in as little as 3 months (Halpern, 2008; Warriner, 2004).

Language barriers result in more time comprehending the learning material in English, especially academic English. Refugee students feel that courses move too fast for them (Earnest et al., 2010). They may also have difficulties understanding and communicating with the instructor due to differences in English accents (Prokop, 2013). Writing in academic English is particularly difficult as refugee students may have no previous experience in academic writing (Earnest et al., 2010; Perry, 2008). Unfamiliarity with the college environment and expectations can also affect the learning and adjustment of the refugee college student. Refugee students who have not experienced similar educational systems in their home countries may find higher education settings unfamiliar and alienating, and have difficulty navigating bureaucratic processes. Refugee students who come from non-industrialized backgrounds may not be familiar with computers and accessing the internet. Such students find it challenging to complete assignments and do research using technology they do not have previous experience with (Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010). To address both language barriers and unfamiliarity with the college environment, instructors can provide refugee students with information of where to get help in completing assignments, such as the



campus computer or writing centers. Refugee students can also be paired with a study buddy or group, where he/she can not only get help with technology and coursework, but also practice communication in English, and build social networks.

Differences in teaching and learning practices may also affect the learning, adjustment, and engagement of refugee students in the college classroom. For instance, many educators emphasize self-directed and independent learning. Refugee students may be more familiar with group work, or having the instructor provide all the directions and learning materials (Joyce et al, 2010; Taffer, 2010). Instructors can combine what students are familiar with and what is typically practiced in the classroom. Group discussions in particular have been found helpful in increasing support networks (Joyce et al, 2010). Culturally-inherent practices such as

writing autobiographies and storytelling may be effective for African refugee students, but care must be taken to use the same methods for other refugee students who do not want to recall traumatic experiences (Perry, 2008).

Learning content may have little or no relevance. Refugee students feel they can more confidently contribute to discussions on international issues due to prior or related experiences, instead of topics that focus more on local issues (Earnest et al., 2010; Warriner, 2010). Instructors are encouraged to design curricula that include topics that raise awareness about international or diversity issues and engage refugee student participation. Refugee students are adults, so learning content must also be aligned with their work and life experiences, connected to work values and contexts of the resettled community, and proficient enough for them to confidently gain entry into credit





In an ideal world, community colleges would have unlimited resources to help their refugee students. The harsh reality is that community colleges, especially those that rely on tight state budgets, may not be able to afford extensive training on cultural competency for all campus community members, design culturally-appropriate tools for teaching, learning, and other culture-responsive programs. As an emerging demographic, however, refugee students rely on the community college to help them achieve self-sufficiency and successfully integrate into society. Given this critical role, community college leaders can begin their planning efforts by identifying the refugee students in their student population, as they could be grouped with other labels for reporting purposes. These numbers can guide efforts in planning, facilitating, and evaluating educational interventions, practice, and policies related to addressing the needs of refugee students at the community college.

## Student Services and Support

Refugee students face challenges navigating bureaucratic processes such as applying for financial aid and validating prior qualifications (Morrice, 2013; Reyes, 2013; Taffer, 2010). Some community colleges like Palm Beach State College in Florida have formal programs in place to help immigrant students navigate the campus, such as conducting orientation workshops, campus tours, and guest speakers from different college service offices (Lowe, 2014). Despite the variety of student service and support available at the community college, refugee students may not be aware of their availability due to perceptions that the programs are culturally ill-suited or unacceptable (Earnest et al., 2010; Szelényi & Chang, 2002). Effort is needed to connect refugee students to much-needed support services. Career and academic advising were found to be especially necessary for refugee students (Morrice, 2013).

Creating a sense of community within and outside of the campus is also essential to the mental and social well-being of refugee students (Joyce et al., 2010) as well as to strengthen familial and social capital (Yosso, 2005). Refugee students typically have weak support systems, due to demanding work schedules, difficulties communicating in English, and cultural barriers (Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Morrice, 2013). Instructional leaders can create a sense of community and opportunities for students to regularly meet, interact and find varied types of support by designating support persons (e.g. volunteer students, liaison) to spearhead efforts like facilitating social events for working refugee students. Hosting events with ethnic community centers, church groups, resettlement agencies, and other educational institutions can also boost a sense of belongingness and validate cultural identities (Earnest et al., 2010; Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

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