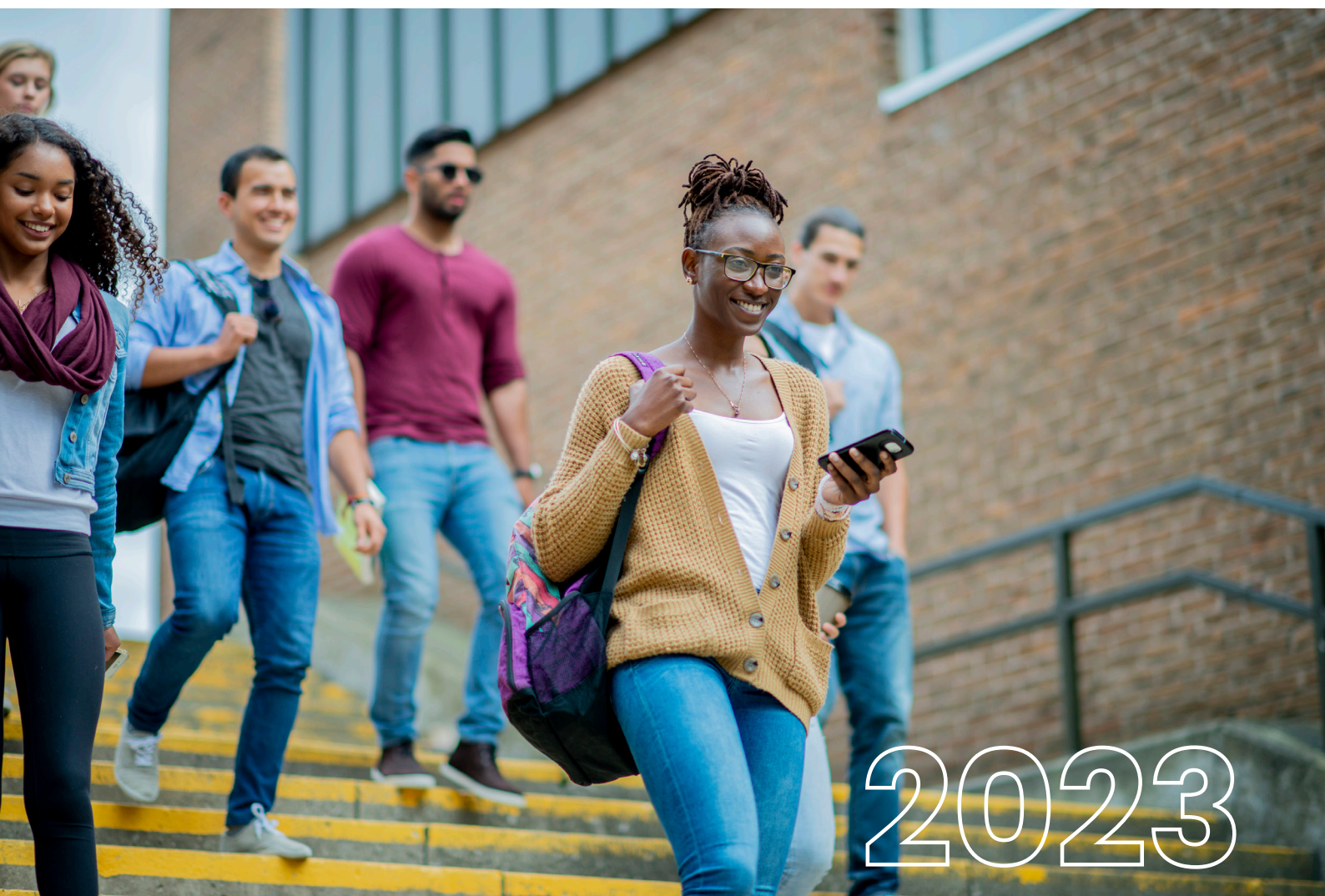


# Unlocking Potential:

Enhancing Community College Services  
for Immigrant and Refugee Students



2023

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# Introduction

Upwardly Global has worked at the intersection of immigrant inclusion and workforce development for over two decades, supporting immigrant, refugee, and asylee professionals in rebuilding their lives and careers in the U.S. and unlocking their vital contributions to our workforce and economy. To date, we have supported nearly 10,000 newcomers in their transition from underemployment into quality jobs with an average starting salary of \$65,000. Our efforts have added more than \$50 million to local economies each year.

## Immigrant and refugee talent is growing but untapped

The number of college-educated immigrants is on the rise in nearly every state across America. Between 2010 to 2018, 83% of growth in the U.S. working-age population came from immigrants and their children; between now and 2035, all growth can be attributed to this community. Yet nearly 2.4 million of these newcomers are currently unemployed or underemployed, with Black and Latino immigrants experiencing the highest levels of labor market exclusion. Though individuals often enter the U.S. with a wealth of experience and knowledge, they face significant challenges when attempting to continue their careers.

## Community colleges are an essential gateway

Community colleges are well-positioned to help immigrants obtain an affordable postsecondary education, learn English language skills, and prepare for the labor market.

*Nearly a third of community college students are, in fact, immigrant-origin students*

seeking just that along with peer-to-peer engagement and other opportunities to further their education, launch their careers, and build their personal and professional networks. These colleges, however, face immense challenges in meeting the workforce development needs of newcomers with varying skill levels, and there is limited research on the most effective programs and interventions.

## Practical strategies are needed

For the U.S. to meaningfully advance the inclusion of immigrant, refugee, and asylee professionals and their skills, and help them build stable futures in the communities they now call home, we must continue to invest resources and build capacity in the community college ecosystem.

**In this report, we share fresh insights from community colleges, highlighting best practices and gaps in career services offerings for immigrant student populations, along with tested resources and strategies that can eliminate employment barriers for these students.**

This report was informed by key stakeholder interviews and in-depth focus groups with community college practitioners across California and Texas, as well as national survey data from more than 80 college practitioners. Upwardly Global conducted this research between May and August 2023 with funding support from the Lumina Foundation and research partners at the National Council for Workforce Education.

As the nation looks for solutions to advance immigrant workforce inclusion, community colleges will continue to be leaders and champions. Our findings serve as a resource for all stakeholders in the community college ecosystem to advance and scale systems-level strategies for this ever-growing community of eager career seekers, neighbors, and future colleagues.



# Community Colleges:

## Gateways to Career Success

### How community colleges support immigrants and refugees

Community colleges have played an increasingly vital role in supporting immigrants and refugees who come from around the world to gain an economic foothold in the labor market and integrate into the social fabric of their communities. Immigrants and refugees turn to community colleges because they offer an accessible and affordable path to higher education, meaningful careers, and civics instruction.

Yet one of community colleges' greatest strengths — their accessibility — can also be a challenge, especially for immigrant-origin students who are often unfamiliar with them. Community colleges are uniquely American, and immigrants may not know how to navigate the array of credit and noncredit courses and short-term certificates to improve their English language skills and prepare for better jobs, graduate schools, further certification, or professional licensure in the U.S. Community colleges, in fact, have yet to “systematically reach out” to internationally educated immigrants and refugees by showcasing their unique resources, according to research by the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE). While we see important improvements today, more work is needed to effectively leverage existing community college resources and develop more targeted and integrated initiatives that support internationally trained professionals.<sup>1</sup>

### Untapped potential for the U.S. economy and communities

Immigrant-origin students are the fastest-growing student population in U.S. higher education and accounted for 80% of the increase in overall U.S. college enrollment in the past two decades.<sup>2</sup> Immigrants and their children are expected to make up almost all workforce growth over the next two decades as baby boomers retire and the population ages.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, many industries face growing labor shortages. Middle-skills jobs, requiring more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree, compose more than half (52%) of the labor market in all fifty states. Yet only 43% of U.S. workers have access to the skills training needed to fill those jobs.<sup>4</sup> As demand for middle-skill jobs rises, many states will find it difficult to reach their higher education and workforce goals without tapping into the immense potential of immigrant-origin students. A 2019 report by the Migration Policy Institute, for instance, found that immigrant-origin adults who had earned nondegree certificates or licenses in certain occupations — such as barbers and licensed practical nurses — had higher levels of labor-force participation, higher incomes, and lower rates of unemployment than those without them.<sup>5</sup>

Community colleges are increasingly aligning with their state's education and workforce goals; to meet shared targets, they are investing in efforts that ensure the career success of their immigrant and refugee student populations.

Best practices, such as accelerated career pathways, stackable credentials, and career navigators, have helped internationally educated immigrant students achieve their educational and career goals. These practices often serve a range of underrepresented, nontraditional students and align with community colleges' core mission and strategies to recruit and empower a diverse student body and strengthen regional economies. Targeted immigrant education initiatives, including those for internationally trained professionals (ITPs), contribute toward colleges' overall student retention, degree/certificate completion, and employment outcomes.

# Best Practices & Bright Spots

Our interviews with community college administrators and frontline practitioners found “bright spots” at several community colleges. Our national survey further found a shift toward greater resource allocation in training resources for ITPs, better data tracking of ITPs, and improved job market data collection compared to a 2015 survey conducted by CCCIE. These bright spots demonstrate commitment to and progress toward addressing the career goals of internationally trained professionals.

In the best-case scenario, community colleges secure funding through a blend of private and public grants to implement initiatives providing specialized academic and career support for ITPs, often in partnership with workforce development stakeholders. Community colleges more typically leverage existing resources and intentionally build on colleges’ current programs and services for engaging, advising, and educating ITPs. Best practices illustrating this approach are described in [Bridging the Gap for Foreign-Educated Immigrants](#), an online toolkit based on input from 20 community colleges and career pathway programs.

Nonetheless, community college practitioners often cited a lack of both financial and staffing resources as key barriers to serving immigrant and refugee students, especially those with prior educational and career credentials. Community college leaders are increasingly recognizing the need for more tailored guidance and additional resources to address the complexities inherent in serving ITPs. Several key practices have emerged as most effective:

## 1) Increased focus on short-term credentials

Community colleges are now offering micro-credentialing and short-term certificates, along with digital badging. Short-term

stackable credentials can be stand-alone options or embedded in longer-term career pathways with multiple entry and exit points. South Texas College (STC) has seen an increase in students seeking micro-credentials and other short term certificate programs to quickly enter the workforce in response to the post-pandemic job market. To further support students, STC has partnered with Google in offering an initiative focusing on micro-credentialing skills that helps with “everything Google.” Other social service organizations offer critical wraparound services, including financial assistance, childcare, and food pantries. Despite not being specifically targeted at immigrants and refugees, these initiatives have proved beneficial for this demographic. Further, STC’s promotion of the College Central Network, an online jobs board, has been critical in helping students access employment opportunities nationwide.

Demand-driven ESL (English as a Second Language) and job skills-integrated courses and initiatives have proven to be effective in responding to community needs and filling critical skills shortages. MiraCosta College in southern California, for instance, has developed a job skills certificate program in affordable housing management to meet the regional labor market’s pressing need for affordable housing. Additionally, El Camino College in Los Angeles County offers several ESL short-term certificate programs integrating medical terminology with language skills for mid-level technical jobs, such as pharmacy technician or medical assistants.

Academic, continuing education, and workforce development advisors must be well versed in both credit and noncredit programs for internationally educated immigrants and refugees to understand the full array of options available to them. Noncredit, short-term, industry-recognized certificates provide swift entry into living-wage jobs in the workforce. These jobs can be stepping stones to higher-level professional careers for

# Best Practices & Bright Spots

foreign-educated students who may not be able to immediately afford a credit-based degree program or the demanding process of becoming relicensed in their profession.

## 2) Data collection

The college practitioners we spoke with are acutely aware of the need to collect data on the backgrounds of immigrant-origin students and the outcomes achieved, and some are moving in that direction. One targeted initiative, the [Internationally Trained Professionals \(ITP\)](#) program at Austin Community College in Texas, collects data on students' backgrounds and progress through 1) an entrance survey that gathers information on students' prior university degrees and certificates, professional careers, languages spoken, goals, and needed support; 2) feedback from ESL and ITP students and instructors; and 3) job placement data provided by employers. The ITP team continuously strives to improve its success metrics and is working with its Career Services department and student Career Pathways Ambassadors to find new ways to advance its data collection.

The Alamo Colleges use a form during the intake process that asks about refugee students' prior educational and professional backgrounds. Whenever possible, the college has interpreters present to help with the intake process. Other colleges, like El Camino College in California, collaborate with different departments to better track and support immigrant and refugee students. The college's Career and Technical Education department, which provides 36 career-specific programs, including ESL contextualized industry courses, is partnering with the Institutional Advancement office to better understand the demographics of its user base, streamline its operations, and improve access to and the tracking of its immigrant and refugee students. Lone Star College in Texas noted how their partnership with a community-based organization (CBO) has



increased its capacity to gather information on its immigrant and refugee student population's prior education and credentials. Los Angeles Trade Technical College has started to leverage its grant-funded contract training under the California Employment Training Panel to support some credit career pathway programs — a move that will greatly enhance data collection efforts.

## 3) Emphasis on case managers and career navigators

Case managers and career navigators who are knowledgeable about issues and resources unique to, or more complex for, ITPs can provide critical guidance and support to students at various points, such as intake, enrollment, ESL classes, and career plan mapping.

San Jacinto College in Texas offers free "Internationally Trained Professionals" classes for students with advanced degrees from another country who want to learn more about and navigate educational and employment systems in the U.S. They provide English language support in the context of higher education and professions. Case managers at San Jacinto College near

# Best Practices & Bright Spots

Houston, Texas support internationally trained immigrants and refugees by successfully marketing to recruit students; connecting students to employer, campus, and community resources; setting up successful orientations, information sessions, and/or tours at the college or with employers; and collecting data to more effectively meet the needs of students, employers, and the community.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, a Career Pathways Navigator in the Austin Community College's Adult Education department works closely with the ITP team at critical stages including recruitment, educational and career advising, data collection, community/business partnerships, and teaching/curriculum development.

Career navigators at the Alamo Colleges in San Antonio, Texas identify immigrant and refugee students' concerns and flag issues with classes that the college needs to address. If students are dealing with barriers such as legal challenges, case managers will find community support systems to help. As part of its Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education program, college administrators plan to bolster their case management and career navigation services to better support immigrant and refugee students with advanced degrees from their home countries. They also plan to improve the data tracking of students after they exit the ESL Bridge program and other Integrated Education and Training initiatives.

## 4) Building trust and a sense of community

Managing student expectations versus the reality of what it takes to reenter their fields is challenging. In our focus group discussions, several community college practitioners emphasized the importance of building trust and creating a sense of community to support immigrants and refugees. Practitioners help address students' frustrations, boost

their confidence, and encourage them to persist despite the roadblocks they encounter. Navigating the noncredit/credit divide can be particularly daunting among adult ESL learners, who began with noncredit courses and don't understand why they may be charged when transitioning to credit courses.

Most community colleges refer internationally educated immigrants and refugees to any one of several foreign-credential evaluation services to determine how their previous educational or career achievements will be recognized by colleges or prospective employers. However, their chosen profession may require a long relicensing process that's too costly and time-consuming to pursue, leaving some students with professional backgrounds to consider alternatives. It is therefore important for advisors to understand students' career goals as well as the college's certificate programs related to alternative careers to provide tailored guidance to these students.

# Addressing Gaps and Barriers

Community colleges are continuously iterating how to best serve all students, including immigrants and refugees; however, significant gaps and barriers persist and there is need for more tailored outreach, advising, and design of career pathways that seek to expand and diversify the pipeline of workers into in-demand professions in healthcare, engineering, information technology, and beyond. The following key issues must be addressed to better meet the needs of these unique student populations:

## 1) Insufficient data tracking on immigrants and refugees

*The ability to track data on immigrants and refugees remains a significant challenge, compounded particularly by undocumented students' fears of sharing personal information related to their immigration status and not knowing how the information will be used.*

If data tracking is available, it's often siloed between departments, limiting its efficacy and access. As colleges increasingly focus on career success and placement as an outcome, robust and sensitive data-tracking mechanisms are ever more critical. Trust building is an integral part of this

process, and data tracking must respect students' privacy and concerns. Shared databases, benchmark and baseline data, and, most importantly, transparent data protection and usage processes become key to discover, evaluate, and address the specific needs of immigrants and refugees, as well as for tracking the impact of any effort to support them.

## 2) Lack of differentiated career services for immigrants and refugees

Generally, career services do not differentiate between immigrant students and the broader student population. Moreover, resources such as welcome centers, counseling services, career navigation services, apprenticeship programs, ambassador programs, entrepreneurship programs, and bridge programs often operate in silos. These services may lack the materials, knowledge, and expertise to support immigrant and refugee students to:

- Understand career pathways in the U.S. and how their professional profile and skill set can map to opportunities.
- Evaluate licensing requirements and reskilling/upskilling opportunities.
- Approach the U.S. job market with a deeper understanding of cultural nuances, expectations, and behavior in professional spaces.
- Efficiently prepare job search documents (resumes, cover letters, thank you notes) that are tailored to the expectations of U.S. recruiters.
- Build a professional network from scratch to practice industry lingo, learn about opportunities, and obtain referrals.

## 3) Difficulty building employer partnership pipelines

Building employer partnership pipelines that are skill-based



# Addressing Gaps and Barriers

can heighten the impact of noncredit courses and offer a more affordable and accessible pathway for professional immigrants and refugees to reenter their fields and restart their careers. However, it remains challenging for community colleges to forge lasting connections with, and navigate the expectations of, employers who tend to recognize and value more traditional education and career pathways. Immigrant and refugee professionals whose careers may not follow typical U.S. pathways and who pursued noncredit courses to quickly reenter their fields are especially disadvantaged by such preferences.

#### 4) Limited resources and knowledge base to serve immigrants and refugees

More robust resources and better-trained staff members could greatly improve the experience of immigrant and refugee students. Community colleges need to enhance their ability to reach immigrant-origin students, navigate cultural differences, manage students' expectations, and address common barriers (e.g., lack of confidence in English language skills, lack of U.S. job search skills, and difficulties understanding the U.S. job market). They also need to provide more information on career pathways to help immigrant-origin students make informed decisions about their educational and career journeys.

**Close to 80%**  
of respondents say their community college needs to improve their capacity in meeting the specific needs of immigrant and refugee students.

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**Only 10%**  
of community colleges surveyed are currently meeting the need to support re-credentialing and career re-entry.

**30%**  
have no programs to support re-credentialing and career re-entry.

# The Path Forward

Addressing the unique needs of immigrants and refugees in career services requires a collaborative approach across stakeholders in the community college ecosystem. Executive-level leadership is critical for leveraging strategic investment in programs supporting immigrants and refugees. Community college leaders can demonstrate their commitment by allocating and bringing together the resources that allow programs to succeed, facilitating participation at all levels of the college and across credit and noncredit departments, and engaging with a variety of community partners. Below are recommendations and potential areas of opportunity:

## 1) Explore diverse and sustainable sources of funding

Finding a diversified stream of federal, state, local, and private funding can provide the critical resources needed to expand and improve services for immigrant and refugee students; however, special attention is needed to ensure that these funding sources are stable and sustainable over time. Public funding streams that have been tapped to increase resources for newcomers include the Workforce Innovation and

Opportunity Act, Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, SNAP Employment and Training, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and Community Development Block Grants.<sup>7</sup>

## 2) Invest in career services

Career services departments play a pivotal role in guiding students toward successful opportunities to advance their education and careers. Increased funding can enhance these services, provide more specialized support for immigrant and refugee students, and increase staff capacity to serve this population effectively. For example, effective front-loading of career advice when students first enroll can help them better understand the critical steps — and cultural variances — of the U.S. job search, as well as available jobs in their chosen field and how they can continue to build on their community college education to earn credentials or a degree. Increased use of online tools, such as job search preparation resources and career pathway roadmaps, can help advisors and students understand career opportunities, the educational degrees or certificates needed for those opportunities, the jobs outlook, and how to find relevant scholarships, internships, and volunteer opportunities.

## 3) Increase the professional development of faculty and staff

*Faculty and staff need ongoing training to better serve immigrant and refugee students.*

This can include training on cultural competency, understanding the unique challenges faced by these students, and learning best practices for supporting their academic and career success. Examples of skills that faculty and staff can be



# The Path Forward

trained to support immigrant students facing unique barriers include navigating licensure and certification processes by state and industry, coaching on the nuances of the U.S. job search, and building professional networks to advance career opportunities.

## 4) Leverage statewide and national networks

Statewide and national networks can play a key role in the expansion, replication, continuous improvement, and scaling of programs for internationally trained immigrant and refugee students. The Texas Workforce Commission, for example, provides funding and professional development networking that strengthen community college and adult education programs for ITPs. The Skilled Immigrant Integration Program offers communities across the country an opportunity to leverage technical assistance from WES Global Talent Bridge and its national partners, including Upwardly Global. Communities may also join its network to further their state and local immigrant and refugee workforce inclusion initiatives. Cross-sector networks facilitate the sharing of best practices and additional resources, open funding opportunities, assist with coordinating support services, and foster greater collaboration among stakeholders.

## 5) Engage key stakeholders in the ecosystem

Different stakeholders in the ecosystem can play specific roles in supporting immigrant and refugee students, including internationally trained professionals:

- **Community colleges** should continue to develop and implement targeted services for immigrant and refugee students by expanding their data-tracking capabilities, offering differentiated career services, and developing

partnership pipelines with employers.

- **Employers** can offer work-based learning opportunities, such as internships and apprenticeships, that help immigrant and refugee students gain practical skills and experience. They can also engage in skill-based hiring practices that recognize the value of noncredit courses and credentials.
- **Workforce agencies** such as OneStops and Workforce Development Boards can collaborate with community colleges and employers to facilitate career pathways for immigrant and refugee students. This includes identifying in-demand skills, aligning training programs with labor market needs, training career coaches on the nuances of the job search process for ITPs, and providing job placement services.
- **Community-based organizations** can provide wraparound services, such as housing, food, and legal assistance, that help immigrant and refugee students overcome barriers to success. They can also offer cultural and language services, facilitate data sharing, and help build trust within the community.

Through concerted and coordinated efforts, these key stakeholders can collectively support the success of internationally educated immigrant and refugee students, help them realize their full individual potential, and help communities to better capture the tremendous talent and perspective of immigrant and refugee students.

# Conclusion

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Community college programs serving immigrant and refugee students help them build relevant academic, communication, and in-demand job skills while creating natural learning communities where students can learn from and mentor one another. These intercultural learning experiences benefit the college community and strengthen the workforce by preparing individuals to work on diverse teams and serve an increasingly diverse, multilingual customer and client base.

Gaps and barriers persist, however, in the programs that prepare immigrants and refugees for the U.S. workforce, from a lack of differentiated services for immigrant-origin students to the need for employer partnerships and staff training. To address these gaps, a collaborative ecosystem approach involving community colleges, workforce agencies, and community-based organizations is key. Investments in both resources and capacity building are also critical, along with a concerted commitment to understanding and addressing the unique needs of the immigrant and refugee community.

Upwardly Global will continue to engage on this critical topic and will share our learnings with the larger ecosystem as we advocate, along with our partners, for increased funding and policies that support the inclusion of immigrant-origin students in higher education and the workforce. We invite you to continue to follow this issue, to share your own experiences and insights, and to join us in our commitment to ensuring that our education and workforce systems are increasingly inclusive to the benefit of all.

For media inquiries, contact [media@upwardlyglobal.org](mailto:media@upwardlyglobal.org). For more information on these findings, contact [workforce@upwardlyglobal.org](mailto:workforce@upwardlyglobal.org).





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