

Passport to Progress: Recreating Career Pathways for Immigrant Professionals

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Executive Summary

Philadelphia is now home to more than 200,000 immigrants, reversing decades of population decline and firmly rooting the city's potential for economic growth in the contributions of these newcomers. However, their ability to fully utilize skills and experience in the workforce is often limited. Even though more than 40 percent of immigrants in Philadelphia hold at least a bachelor's degree, they face higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than college-educated native-born workers. Nationally, nearly two million college-educated immigrants and refugees are working outside of their trained professions in middle- or low-skilled jobs, allowing years of experience, education, and talent to go to waste. Consequently, individuals experience isolation, families struggle, communities suffer, and economies lose out on valuable talent.

Preventing "brain waste" and assisting immigrant professionals to move along a path to economic and

professional success requires identifying and overcoming barriers that many encounter, including limited English proficiency (LEP), lack of social and professional networks, complex professional licensing processes, employer discrimination, and a lack of understanding and experience within the U.S. workforce. In 2014, the Welcoming Center was awarded multi-year learning grants from the Barra Foundation and the Knight Foundation to establish the International Professionals Program (IPP). This program is helping highly skilled immigrants actualize their full potential and informing the emerging field of skilled immigrant integration on a national level, as one of only a handful of organizations in the U.S. to address the issue, and the only organization of its type in Pennsylvania. Throughout this article, we will share what encouraged us to start this work, how the program has evolved, and through the experience of our participants, illustrate unanticipated challenges and affirm strategies that lead to success, with the goal of informing service providers, funders, and policy makers.

Introduction

Each year, over 1,300 individuals come to the Welcoming Center seeking our services. We meet immigrants at all skill and education levels, from women who have never worked outside of their homes and are barely literate in their own native languages, to immigrant professionals who were doctors, lawyers, or accountants in their home

countries. Our story began, however, with one professional -- a physical therapist.

From County Monaghan, Ireland, Anne O'Callaghan came to the United States in 1970. A foreign-trained physical therapist, Anne aimed to build a career in Philadelphia. Upon her arrival, she learned that she could not take the Pennsylvania State Medical Examiners' physical therapy licensing exam because she had been educated abroad. It took Anne more than three years to obtain the licenses she needed to practice. Anne eventually thrived in her field, teaching future physical therapy students at the University of Pennsylvania, but the barriers she faced to re-enter her profession shaped her immigrant experience. In 2003, Anne opened the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians. Our mission is to accelerate immigrant integration and economic advancement through education, training, employment, and entrepreneurship.

The Emerging Field of Skilled Immigrant Integration

A recent report from the Migration Policy Institute estimates that the skill underutilization of college-educated immigrants accounts for billions of dollars of foregone annual earnings and tax revenue at the federal, state, and local levels. If these professionals were employed at a level fitting their skills and experience, they would earn a collective 39 billion more annually, contributing more than 10 billion in taxes. Those who were

educated abroad are even more susceptible to brain waste. Some 48 percent of those who entered the country between 2011 and 2015 were educated abroad. As the share of immigrants coming to the U.S. with foreign education increases significantly, workforce integration becomes more pressing. In Pennsylvania, 56 percent of the foreign-born population earned their bachelor's degree abroad and 22 percent of that population is either working in low-skilled jobs or unemployed, so this issue is of particular concern at a local level.

While the problem of brain waste is not new, the field of skilled immigrant integration has only emerged within the last 15 years. Programmatic and policy interventions are still evolving, as new research and evidence-based approaches continue to provide insight. Organizations like IMPRINT (Immigrant Professional Integration), play a key role in driving advocacy efforts at the national and state levels, disseminating information, and mapping efforts across the country.

The essential questions the field has sought to answer are: what factors lead to skill underutilization and what contributes to professional success? While there may be multiple, compounding barriers that prevent a foreign-trained professional from practicing in the field for which they were trained, primary amongst these are: LEP, lack of social capital and professional networks, difficulty navigating the professional licensing process or the need for additional training to practice, employer discrimination

and lack of recognition for foreign education or work experience, and lack of understanding and experience within the U.S. workforce. Immigrant professionals face a difficult decision and often must choose between the immediate need to find employment and the significant investment of time and energy to navigate these complexities. Many find themselves working in entry-level, low-wage jobs with fewer barriers to entry, leaving little time and disposable income to devote to advancing their careers. In recognition of these barriers, the Welcoming Center sought to identify and pursue an appropriate program model to meet the needs of these jobseekers -- whose complex pathways are impossible to address under the short-term, rapid-employment requirements of publicly-funded workforce services.

Developing the IPP Model

In 2015, the Welcoming Center launched the International Professionals Program (IPP). Following an extensive planning period analyzing regional employer demand, state- and county-level workforce data, and reviewing the demographic characteristics of immigrants who had contacted us seeking employment services over our 12-year history, it was clear: despite the growing demand for culturally and linguistically diverse professionals, and the existence of a pool of qualified potential candidates, the Philadelphia region lacked a meaningful infrastructure to connect the two. Publicly funded workforce development

services are stretched thin and tightly restricted in their ability to offer assistance beyond basic job-search information. Human resources staff must focus on “job ready” candidates. Neither group has the time nor expertise to advise immigrant candidates on the complex process of pursuing higher-level opportunities. The Welcoming Center sought to become the informed advisors to guide immigrants through this process.

The program began with a focus on recruiting professionals with experience in two high-priority areas, Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) and healthcare. Participants were screened to meet the minimum qualifications of the program -- a high-level of English language proficiency, a bachelor’s degree or higher, and the desire to work in their trained profession -- and then they were welcomed into a semi-annual cohort of program participants. Demand in the first year was so great that we enrolled more than 40 participants in each cohort, though we had originally envisioned cohorts of 30 individuals. Doctors, nurses, and dentists made up much of the first healthcare cohort and engineers, biologists, and chemists filled out the STEM cohort.

Each cohort progressed through a series of services, starting with a comprehensive, individualized assessment of each participant’s education, English language skills, employment history, and feasibility of transitioning back into their chosen profession. In anticipating that some participants would require intensive intervention and

others a lighter “touch,” we developed an extensive menu of general and industry-specific offerings. We held contextualized English language classes, *English for Healthcare Professionals and Scientific and Technical Writing*, and started *Conversations about the American Healthcare System*, a course designed as a dialogue between foreign-trained health professionals and local practicing physicians and nurses. The program also provided training on topics such as networking, resume writing, employer research, and interviewing techniques.

The learning curve for the first year of the program was steep, with staff having to develop knowledge and capacity across a wide range of professions to provide accurate and beneficial guidance, while at the same time being responsive to the overarching needs of the group. We saw an overwhelming need for gateway jobs to help participants stabilize their financial situations. Many participants were recent arrivals, sometimes within one year or a few months. Fortunately, we could leverage employment placement services through Welcoming Center’s own previously established programming to connect participants to entry-level work and thus keep the participants advancing along their career pathway. We also identified a need to provide intensive support in relationship building, to expand professional networks, but also to combat isolation, desolation, and a sense of loss of professional identity. We did not anticipate how greatly low levels of comfort and confidence in skills would affect

a participant's ability to be proactive, self-driven, and motivated to pursue their goals.

The cohort model was instrumental in providing peer-to-peer support, but the diversity of professions within one group and the staggered timelines of personal progression dictated a change in our approach. For the second year of the program, we chose to focus on specific professions within healthcare and STEM -- building cohorts of accountants, IT professionals, and nurses. By providing more focused, industry-specific guidance and exposure to targeted networks of opportunity, we hoped to enhance our impact with participants and increase organizational capacity. Industry roundtables and extensive corporate engagement opportunities, coupled with our *Professional Writing* course and job readiness workshops, rounded out the training for the IT and accounting professionals.

Programming support to help obtain a Pennsylvania License in Nursing was more extensive and included both Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) preparation courses.

Employment opportunities and earning capacity for participants in the program improved; one hundred percent of those who were unemployed were able to gain full-time employment during their participation in the program and the majority of participants were employed in their industry, even if only at the gateway level. We

came across challenges as well, including underestimating the amount of remediation that would be necessary for the nurses to pass the NCLEX exam and the high level of participant engagement required to move through the program during the one-year timeline we had allocated; an eighteen-month timeline would have been more realistic for this cohort in particular. Additionally, though we chose to limit the number of occupations, the highly-individualized nature of career pathway development still requires considerable expertise to provide accurate and current career advice.

While industry-focused cohorts were effective in moving participants along a pathway into their desired field, they also reinforced patterns we saw emerge in the first year of the program. English language proficiency continued to be by far the greatest impediment to professional success and the need for contextualized courses remained evident across all professions. Even with industry-specific knowledge, the importance of building the skills and networks needed to succeed was critical. Networking, relationship building, having trusted allies in the workforce, and developing cultural competence are all necessary for landing a job in today's economy, regardless of profession, and the IPP was playing a critical role in providing access to these opportunities.

Participants who took advantage of community and network-building experiences, and where the program was able to facilitate these connections, saw greater

progression professionally and personally. Therefore, an equally important function of the IPP is the extent to which it encourages a sense of belonging and promotes participation. To this end, one outcome of the program has been to develop more opportunities for this type of engagement within the organization. We have since established a Participant Advisory Council, inclusive of many IPP graduates, who help guide the work of the Welcoming Center and are key to our community-building and civic engagement efforts throughout the city.

Participant Stories

As we were launching the IPP in 2015, IMPRINT and WES Global Talent Bridge published *Steps to Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals*, which showed that immigrants who invest time and energy into acculturation, building social capital, and gaining “American credentials” through work or academic experience here in the U.S., have higher incomes and lower rates of unemployment. Over the past three years, the experiences of our participants have greatly informed the program’s developmental progression. They have affirmed strategies that research within the emerging field of immigrant integration promotes as well as helped to enlighten areas where greater attention is still needed. The stories of IPP participants Maria P., Djibrine, and Maria H.C. illustrate elements that informed and steered the development of the latest iteration of the IPP, which launched in April of

2017.

Maria P.: Gaining U.S. Experience and a Short-term Credential

From the start, we aspired to establish pipelines for internships, volunteer opportunities, and short-term credentials that would help move participants along the path to permanent professional employment. Four participants in the first healthcare cohort received, in total, \$5,000 in scholarships to participate in the Community Health Worker Certificate Program provided by Thomas Jefferson University. They completed a one-year training program and had support connecting to 120 hours of practicum experience.

"I remember the beginning of the recession. It was really, really bad. There was no more opportunity for us." Maria had a life in her home of Madrid, Spain with a husband, friends, and a close family. Before coming to the United States, Maria worked as an education specialist in language disorders within the Spanish education system. She earned both her Master of Science in Autism Spectrum Disorders and her Bachelor of Arts in Education in Spain.

Despite her experience in Spain, when she came to the United States, Maria struggled with trying to find a job in her field. One of the greater challenges for Maria was that her Spanish credentials did not carry any weight here in

Philadelphia. She needed help formatting her resume and feeling confident in an interview but she also needed support in navigating the job search and finding jobs for which she was qualified. Eventually, Maria connected with the Welcoming Center. Initially seeking opportunities to enhance her English-speaking capabilities, Maria began by taking classes like Professional Writing. She utilized the resources accessed at the Welcoming Center to the fullest extent and was determined to improve her likelihood of finding a job. Through getting to know people at the Welcoming Center, Maria became involved in the IPP. As a foreign-trained professional with a wealth of experience from her home country, Maria was pleased to find a program that was specifically addressing her unique needs.

Through her connections to the IPP, Maria had the opportunity to apply for Thomas Jefferson University's Community Health Worker Plus program. She received full tuition coverage for the one-year training program. She worked tirelessly throughout the year and has since completed over six issue-specific self-management certification programs. She sees the value and the potential that she has as an English- and Spanish-speaking woman and how her experience as an immigrant can inform work with immigrant communities, especially Spanish-speaking communities here in Philadelphia.

Maria is also one of the founding members of the Welcoming Center's Participant Advisory Council and she

helps to steer the direction of Welcoming Center programming to better serve the needs of communities in our City. Maria's character, on top of her professional and academic experience, and her insight as both a community health worker and an advisory council member, add tremendous value to the Welcoming Center. Maria is part of a team helping to open doors for isolated immigrant communities in Philadelphia.

Djibrine: Building Social Capital in a New City

For many immigrants coming to Philadelphia, the city is their first destination in the U.S. The Welcoming Center published a 2014 report, *Choosing Philadelphia*, that found that 57 percent of respondents arrived directly in the Philadelphia region rather than migrating from elsewhere in the U.S. However, Djibrine's first destination in the U.S. was San Francisco, where he faced the characteristic challenges that impact immigrant professionals entering the workforce. He sought out the guidance of Upwardly Global, a fellow member of the IMPRINT coalition, which has a presence in the Bay area. When he arrived in Philadelphia, although Djibrine had already graduated from a program that offered similar workforce preparation, he joined the IPP to address his need for networking and building social capital in a new city.

Djibrine earned his bachelor's degree in economics and his master's degree in macroeconomics management, in

his home country of Niger. He spent years working for the Nigerien Association of Professional Microfinance Institutions, as the Executive Director. Djibrine is fluent in five languages and has years of supervision experience in accounting and budgeting.

However, despite all of this, Djibrine was met with the same challenges that many foreign-trained professional immigrants face today. He was highly skilled yet his qualifications and credentials were not valued at the level of those of an American-born and trained professional.

While Djibrine was acclimating himself here in America, he pursued an Accounting Clerk Certification from Berkeley Adult School and at present, he is working towards earning his Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Albright College in Reading, PA.

Today, Djibrine works as the accounts payable coordinator for The Center for Autism, here in Philadelphia. Prior to this, he worked for Pangea Global AIDS in Oakland, California. As a Participant Advisory Council member, Djibrine's insight and participation help shape how the Welcoming Center works with foreign-trained professionals

Since connecting with the Welcoming Center, Djibrine has made it a point to discover more about immigrants from Niger in Philadelphia. Through Participant Advisory Council trainings and mentorship, Djibrine has taken a

strategic approach to identify community leaders, and to understand barriers and areas of opportunity for Nigeriens in Philadelphia. He has made it his mission to address these barriers and meet these opportunities by connecting his community with the Welcoming Center.

As an advisory council member, Djibrine has also been a critical influence in the Welcoming Center's examination and development of a new civic participation program.

The Nigerien population in Philadelphia remains an isolated community in many ways, but Djibrine wants to change this. Acting as a 'bridge' for those Nigeriens and others struggling to find gainful employment, Djibrine encourages his community to utilize the Welcoming Center as a launching pad, just as he has.

Maria H.C.: Defining Your Identity

Often overlooked and not widely understood, identity negotiation has been a formative aspect of our work with immigrant professionals. This struggle became the thread woven throughout the program, a pain beyond the challenge of finding a job or earning an income.

Participants were coping with something much deeper, having to reinvent themselves, or even worse, putting their sense of identity on hold. This was particularly evident for more heavily regulated professions, like doctors or dentists, where alternative career options necessitate an identity reevaluation because the path to practicing again could require years of additional study and schooling. The

work of Jelena Zikic, focused on the Canadian experience, informs that "trying to re-enter one's profession in a new country may involve coming to terms both with what we can no longer do and who we can no longer be."

Born and raised in San Jose, Costa Rica, Maria had always known that she wanted to become a doctor from an early age. A graduate of San Juan de Dios Hospital, Maria worked as an attending physician for several years before coming to Philadelphia. It was after meeting and falling in love with her now-husband, that Maria made the decision to move to the United States. This was not an easy choice but she did what she felt was right for her family.

Maria had a difficult transition into her new life in Philadelphia. She did not make it into a residency program as a foreign-trained practicing physician applicant. Maria felt an extreme sense of the loss of identity throughout and after the residency application and interview process. She began to second-guess herself and doubt that she had what it took to work as a medical doctor in her new home country.

Being a medical doctor was more than a profession for Maria, it was part of her identity. Maria was told repeatedly, "You're not putting yourself out there enough!", and received feedback that she did not present as being comfortable with the United States residency process -- a process which, she said, "seemed so natural" for American-born doctors. She struggled to find

the balance between being her authentic self and trying to appease or appeal to a new culture -- a culture which she was still learning to understand. Though she did not make it into a residency program, Maria did not give up hope, eventually visiting the Welcoming Center where she would connect with the International Professionals Program.

Through networking, Maria met other doctors who were struggling to rebuild their professional identities here in America. While in IPP, Maria worked to expand her own network and challenge herself. She worked on building soft skills, as well as becoming more confident and comfortable talking about her experience as a medical doctor, in English. She completed workshop trainings to prepare for the U.S. interview process and learned about workplace norms in American hospitals. After spending considerable time and energy broadening her network, Maria met a doctor working on a research project on Parkinson's Disease. Soon after, she accepted a job offer to work as a research assistant at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

At first, Maria felt strange in the new role and questioned whether or not she had made the right choice, but now she enjoys her job as a researcher and finds the work extremely satisfying. Maria did not plan to work as a researcher but reflecting on her experience, Maria says she sees her past with "different eyes." She was always passionate about science growing up and now, as a

medical researcher, she is fully immersing herself in meaningful scientific research. As a member of the Participant Advisory Council, Maria is further developing her confidence and her leadership capacity by gaining experience. She is an active member and her advisory role offers extremely valuable insight into the world that foreign-trained and practicing medical doctors encounter as they integrate into the American workforce.

Building upon the lessons of the past two years, in April of 2017 the Welcoming Center launched a new iteration of the International Professionals Program with a focus on creating shared experiences amongst cohorts and expanding opportunities to build social capital. A more intensive training curriculum that develops mastery in specific competencies and prepares participants for professional-level employment and long-term success, delivered over the course of 10 weeks, was our innovative solution to meet ongoing participant and programmatic needs. A defined start and end to the programming provides predictability and structure, further facilitating cohesion and motivating participants to begin what, for some, could be a lengthy process. It also allows the organization to build more clearly articulated pipelines and partnerships for work-based learning and mentorship opportunities.

To meet demand and in response to what we coined the "bell curve" of common obstacles across professions, we made the decision to open this cohort to a wider range of

industry backgrounds for the formal programming and to then provide subsequent, guided individual career pathway development. As English language acquisition is perhaps the most critical barrier to re-entry of immigrants into the profession for which they have been trained, the Professional Writing course remains a critical tool that we encourage participants to take as a prerequisite to or following the 10-week intensive programming as needed.

Recommendations

Service providers, funders, and policymakers all play a vital role in building the infrastructure to connect immigrant talent to opportunity. For service providers looking to develop or strengthen programs, it is critical to understand the importance of creating opportunities and helping participants develop the skills to build social capital and expand personal and professional networks. This should be seen as a vital, complementary component to the work of individual career pathway guidance and a key element in combating isolation, navigating identity, and ultimately what can make the difference in providing a passport to progress. Developing partnerships that allow participants to gain U.S. work experience, whether through work-based learning, volunteering, or otherwise, should also be a primary goal.

There remains a critical gap in funding to support this work, as the rigidity of typical workforce and adult education programs often constrain the need for flexibility,

extended timelines, and an individualized approach when working with foreign-trained professionals. That is not to say that these funding streams are not critically important in providing much-needed access to ESL, short-term training, and gateway job opportunities, but that there is an opportunity for strategic philanthropic investment. We know through our own experience, and from the research of World Education Services' publication, *Steps to Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals in the U.S.*, "for immigrant professionals with limited English proficiency, investing in English language training is likely the single most powerful step an individual can take toward his or her future employability." Despite its importance, funding to provide professional-level ESL is limited. Once learners surpass proficiency levels funded by public investment, through programs such as Title II, many are still below a level of proficiency to excel in the workplace. Private investment is needed to support the development, or at least the dissemination, of higher-level ESL programs. The Welcoming Center is grateful to the Knight Foundation and the Barra Foundation for allowing us to build the capacity to support this intensive work. More investment is needed, however, in innovative models that can bridge the short-term standardized outcomes required by traditional workforce funding and the need for individualized guidance and network building.

Finally, while the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) aims to provide more opportunities for highly

skilled immigrants to access the workforce system along their pathway to professional success, the tight integration and close coordination between both immigrant-serving organizations and other partners within this system, especially at a local level, is critical. Employer engagement is paramount and should be sought from the start, not only to identify workforce needs, but to shape curriculum and develop opportunities for work-based learning. Additionally, adult education programs play an important role in equipping many professionals with the basic English language skills they need to access gateway employment. These opportunities are essential to addressing immediate financial needs and to progressing along a pathway to professional success.

While there remains much work to be done, through the ongoing development of our International Professionals Program, The Welcoming Center aims to contribute to the growing pool of research shaping the field of immigrant professional integration. The skills, knowledge and talent of the millions of highly-skilled immigrants that have come to this country seeking opportunity must not go to waste.

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Author Bios

Nicole Pumphrey (Nikki)

Nicole Pumphrey has dedicated her career to using education and economic development as tools to foster cultural understanding and promote inclusion.

Nicole joined the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians as Director of Strategic Partnerships in 2014, where she builds collaborations and advocates for the valuable contributions of immigrants to the region's future social stability and economic prosperity.

Nicole earned her B.A. in French and Korean Studies and an M.S.Ed. in Intercultural Communication from the University of Pennsylvania. Her own experience studying abroad motivated her to spend ten years developing international programs to educate the next generation of leaders. Prior to joining the Welcoming Center, Nicole supported global initiatives at Temple University's Fox School of Business and at the University of Pennsylvania.

Nicole is a lifelong Philadelphian, who has lived in France and Korea, but sees her deep roots in the region as an asset, motivating her to invest in making her hometown a place where everyone has the opportunity to succeed, both newcomers and long-time residents.

Jennifer Ginsberg (Jenny)

Jennifer Ginsberg first joined the Welcoming Center in 2015 while earning her master's degree in nonprofit

leadership at the University of Pennsylvania. Having years of experience in the field of social work, she is thrilled to be participating in the Welcoming Center's efforts of promoting immigrant integration in the city of Philadelphia.

Jenny received her social work degree from The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and draws from her direct-service, research, and program management experience carried out across the globe including in the United States, South America and most recently, in Southeast Asia. Jenny was a Penn Top 10 Fellow at the School of Social Policy & Practice and has worked across academic, social, and media circles to produce meaningful, solution-based journalism. Jenny considers Philadelphia to be one of the most vibrant, artistic, and authentically expressive cities and is proud to call Philly 'home.'