

Pathways for an Equitable and Inclusive
**Recovery for Immigrants,
Refugees, and
International Students**





We are at a pivotal moment in the United States.

Our economy and global reputation must be rebuilt in the wake of four years of harmful policies targeting immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and international students, and the effects of a pandemic. An inclusive recovery should embrace and build on the talents and skills of immigrants and refugees and recognize the critical economic, cultural, and academic contributions of international students.

The stakes are considerable, as illustrated by a Migration Policy Institute (MPI) report on the potential economic contributions of underemployed and unemployed immigrant and refugee professionals living in the U.S. An estimated two million immigrants and refugees who hold bachelor's degrees or higher are either underemployed or unemployed as a result of challenges with international credential recognition, unfamiliarity with the U.S. job market, language barriers, and a lack of workforce training opportunities, resulting in approximately \$39.4 billion in forgone annual earnings and more than \$10 billion yearly in unrealized federal, state, and local taxes.¹

Approximately **2 million** people, making up **25%** of college-educated immigrants in the labor force, are underemployed or unemployed.

Source: Migration Policy Institute

The Biden-Harris administration must take bold action to address this underutilization of talent and ensure an inclusive and vibrant economy that offers equal opportunity to all. This road map outlines five recommendations for the Biden-Harris administration to achieve within its first 100 days in office.

Recommendation 1:

Create a White House Office for New Americans

The U.S. currently lacks a national strategy or framework to promote integration. As a result, over the past decade states and local communities have taken the lead in developing programs and policies that support newcomer integration, often with the collaboration of statewide or local Offices for New Americans (ONAs).

In 2014, the Obama-Biden administration created the White House Task Force on New Americans to strengthen federal immigrant and refugee integration efforts. The task force developed a strategic action plan and launched several successful initiatives to improve immigrant and refugee integration. **A Biden-Harris administration can build on the efforts of the former White House Task Force on New Americans by establishing a White House ONA on Day One to develop a framework for immigrant and refugee integration and to coordinate services across the federal government.** A White House ONA would work with relevant federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Commerce (DOC), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Department of Education (ED), to expand investment in—and strengthen the capacity of—state and local governments and community agencies that assist immigrants and refugees.

 Recommendation 2:

Invest in proven workforce development, English language learning, and adult education models

Immigrants and refugees can meet critical workforce demands including in key sectors such as health care, teaching, and STEM fields. However, many internationally educated professionals are unable to apply their training in the U.S., and consequently work in low-wage jobs that are not commensurate with their skills and experience.

1 in **6** U.S. workers is an immigrant.

Source: American Immigration Council

Workforce development agencies need more support to address the concerns of immigrant and refugee job seekers who often face obstacles obtaining credential recognition, developing soft skills, and accessing specialized technical training. **DOL, ED, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement in HHS should coordinate their efforts more closely to strengthen and expand adult education and workforce development programs that are equipped to serve immigrant and refugee professionals.**

Greater support is also needed for English language learner (ELL) programs to serve immigrants and refugees, including immigrant and refugee professionals who seek to acquire the contextualized English language skills they need to advance in their careers in the U.S. **The Biden-Harris administration should increase funding to address gaps in services for adult English language learners.**

The efforts of the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) underscore the importance of serving professionals who hold international degrees and credentials. TWC provides funding and professional development to support adult education providers and community colleges whose programs offer a variety of services: specialized assessments, credential evaluation and authentication of international degrees and professional credentials, customized career counseling, specialized English language courses, and career pathways training in specific occupations or occupational clusters for professionals seeking to earn U.S. credentials. TWC's efforts help internationally trained professionals connect to their field and provide a critical talent pipeline to employers.

Building on existing effective workforce development training and adult education programs would enable immigrants and refugees to use their skills in professional roles that draw on their qualifications and experience and fill critical jobs in their communities. **The Biden-Harris administration should increase investment in workforce development and adult education programs designed to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee workers.**

The Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians (WCNP) International Professionals Program (IPP) addresses the employment needs of internationally educated immigrants and refugees in Philadelphia. It is the only program of its kind in the tristate region of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. WCNP developed IPP to serve the over 40 percent of immigrant job seekers in Philadelphia who hold college degrees from outside the U.S., many of whom are unemployed or underemployed when they enter the program. Upon completing the IPP, graduates can enroll in the Immigrant Fellowship Program, a 12-week, paid, work-based learning opportunity with Philadelphia city government and private sector employers. To date, 40 percent of fellows have been offered full-time employment with the city.

Pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs also play a vital role in supporting immigrants and refugees in their efforts to hone their skills. In 2019, the DOL announced \$100 million in grant funding to strengthen industry-recognized apprenticeship initiatives and expand access to these opportunities to all Americans. **The Biden-Harris administration should ensure that such federally funded apprenticeship programs enable increased access to immigrant and refugee workers by including contextualized English language instruction for students at varying education levels, and competency-based recognition of prior training and work experience.** Greater investments should also be made in pre-apprenticeship programs and work-based learning models that are tailored to immigrants and refugees who are English language learners.



Community colleges provide another effective pathway to develop English skills and prepare for the U.S. workforce. Research shows that community college support services tailored to meet the unique needs of immigrants and refugees can improve workforce and educational outcomes.ⁱⁱ **The Biden-Harris administration should increase investment in community colleges to ensure that they have the resources necessary to provide support services—such as career placement, academic counseling, and mentoring—to immigrant and refugee students.**

 Recommendation 3:

Build career pathways for immigrant and refugee professionals

69% of respondents surveyed by World Education Services (WES) in 2019 indicated that they intended to pursue licensing or certification in the U.S.

In recent years, researchers and policymakers have focused on the potential of licensing reform to reduce barriers to in-demand licensed occupations and increase economic mobility across states. In 2015 a comprehensive report on occupational licensure issued for the Obama-Biden administration, by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Office of Economic Policy, the Council of Economic Advisers, and DOL outlined recommendations for occupational licensure reform at the federal and state levels, including identifying licensing criteria that create unnecessary barriers to labor-market entry, and improving portability and reciprocity for some licenses across state lines.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 2016, the Obama-Biden administration took important steps on occupational licensure reform including hosting the National Skills and Credential Institute and issuing DOL grants to fund a consortium of states that grew to 16 states committed to addressing disparities in access to occupational licenses for immigrants, members of the military, veterans and their spouses, dislocated workers, and returning citizens. The project received bipartisan support and was coordinated by the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Governors Association, and the Council of State Governments.

To build on these efforts, the Biden-Harris administration should continue to support states committed to reducing barriers to occupational licensure for immigrants and refugees by providing DOL funding to a new cohort of states. The administration should also launch a study on the barriers to licensure that immigrants and refugees face, and recommend best practices to improve access to licensure.

Michigan's Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, in partnership with Upwardly Global, provides an online resource to assist immigrants and refugees who are navigating the state's licensing requirements and to promote Michigan as a destination for immigrant and refugee professionals. The state has also created the Michigan International Talent Solutions (MITS) program within its Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, to remove barriers for immigrants and refugees in accessing services through the provision of training and technical assistance to state agencies.

With growing diversity in the U.S., the linguistic and cultural skills of immigrant health workers are increasingly in demand. Recognizing the essential skills and experience that internationally trained health professionals offer, governors in six states exercised their emergency authority to provide temporary licenses to health care professionals licensed outside the U.S., enabling these qualified health workers to join the fight against COVID-19.

Despite the critical role internationally trained health workers can play to alleviate health care shortages, complex, costly, and time-consuming barriers often stand in their way. **To support states that are addressing these challenges, the Biden-Harris administration should launch a national initiative to improve career pathways for immigrants and refugees who hold international credentials in health.**

After establishing a Foreign-Trained Physician Task Force in 2014 to promote economic integration among physicians trained outside the U.S., Minnesota was recognized by the White House Task Force on New Americans as the first state to implement a comprehensive program to integrate immigrant medical graduates into the physician workforce. The Minnesota program addresses barriers to practice, supports pathways to licensure for immigrant and refugee physicians, and seeks to increase access to health care in underserved communities.

Relevant federal agencies, including HHS, DOL, and ED, should promote access to health care career counseling and training opportunities to support internationally trained health professionals' reentry into the health workforce including through Healthcare Profession Opportunity Grants. **The Biden-Harris**

administration should invest in opportunities for internationally trained immigrants and refugees who need U.S. clinical experience to qualify for U.S. residencies, and support the provision of dedicated primary care residency slots for underemployed internationally trained immigrants and refugees currently living in the U.S.

Greater federal investment is essential for programs like the Welcome Back Initiative—a national effort that comprises 10 Welcome Back Centers across the U.S. which provide career assistance to internationally trained health workers living in the U.S. Each Welcome Back Center location offers orientation and counseling services and supports participants' efforts to develop a career pathway plan that builds on their education, experience, and skills. In addition to receiving support in obtaining professional credentials and licenses, participants also receive assistance navigating education programs, job and volunteer opportunities, and alternative career pathways.

 Recommendation 4:

Rebuild the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program and welcome refugees into an inclusive economy

The refugee resettlement sector in the U.S. is highly focused on rapid attachment to the workforce—which often means placing refugees who hold international credentials in survival jobs that do not make full use of their experience or education. Economic integration and career pathway creation should be key components of U.S. efforts to rebuild the refugee resettlement program. Long-term economic outcomes—including employment status, earning level, and employment that is commensurate with education and experience—must be benchmarks for measuring successful integration.

The Biden-Harris administration has an opportunity to expand and strengthen the Refugee Career Pathways (RCP) program in the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Established in 2018, the RCP program provides refugees with work-based learning opportunities, career coaching and mentoring, connections to educational opportunities, apprenticeships, on-the-job training, help with recredentialing and credential recognition, and vocational English language training.

Another pragmatic strategy for ensuring more effective workforce integration and better utilization of refugee skills and training is to offer comprehensive pre-arrival information on career pathways, credential evaluation and recognition, and access to English language learning opportunities while refugees await resettlement. The resettlement process can take up to three years. During this time

individuals should have access to English language training, career navigation resources, and information about recredentialing so they can get a head start on rejoining their professions in the U.S.

Global Talent, a program of Jannus Inc., launched in 2014 to address the individual and systemic barriers to employment faced by internationally educated immigrants and refugees. Its founders met many professionals, including engineers, physicians, accountants, scientists, and teachers, who secured survival jobs upon arriving in the U.S., but never found their way back to their professional careers. In 2015, Global Talent began providing formal training and personalized coaching to immigrants and refugee professionals seeking to rebuild their careers in Idaho. Through partnerships with Upwardly Global, the Idaho Department of Labor, the College of Western Idaho, local refugee resettlement agencies, committed volunteers, employer collaborations, and dedicated staff, Global Talent has graduated more than 70 newcomers who have obtained professional positions that more fully utilize their skills and talents.

 Recommendation 5:

Revive the reputation of the United States as the leading destination for international students

The U.S. has historically been the top destination globally for international students; however, enrollment numbers have steadily declined since the 2016/17 academic year.^{iv} The COVID-19 pandemic, together with recent harsh and unwelcoming policies and practices limiting the mobility of international students and restricting opportunities for practical training, has undermined the nation's role as an international leader in higher education and contributed to the loss of a critical pipeline of talent.

In 2019, international student enrollment at U.S. higher education institutions had **declined by 10 percent** since the 2015-16 academic year.

Source: Stuart Anderson, "New International Student Enrollment in U.S. Has Fallen 10% since 2015," Forbes, November 2019



International students are vital economic contributors to the U.S.—they create jobs, drive innovation, and enrich our campuses and communities. According to the Institute of International Education, international students contributed \$44.7 billion to the U.S. economy in the 2018-19 academic year.^v The Bipartisan Policy Center estimates that international students contribute \$20 billion in tuition and fees to U.S. academic institutions each year,^{vi} and a recent NAFSA report ties economic contributions from international students to the creation and support of 458,000 jobs.^{vii}

According to a WES August 2020 study, **40 percent** of prospective international students **said they were less interested** in studying in the U.S. **because of the current political and social environment.**

To counteract this trend and restore the nation’s reputation as a premier destination for international students, the Biden-Harris administration must take affirmative steps to create a welcoming environment. **To achieve this, the proposed federal rule eliminating duration of status for international students and exchange visitors must be rescinded on Day One.** A fixed period of stay policy would have a devastating impact on the ability of the U.S. to attract talent from around the world and would exacerbate current declines in international student enrollment by imposing considerable financial burdens on international students and making their course of study in the U.S. unpredictable.^{viii} At a time when academic institutions are already facing significant revenue losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this proposed rule would add additional compliance costs, severely impacting the U.S. higher education system.

International students are experiencing significant visa and consular processing delays further contributing to the decline in enrollment. **The Biden-Harris administration should take steps to improve the visa process for international students by ensuring timely and transparent adjudications on Day One.**

According to a WES survey of international students in 2017, **73 percent** **said the ability to gain U.S. work experience was a key driver** in their decision to study in the U.S.



International students contribute in significant ways to U.S. workplaces through participation in the Optional Practical Training (OPT) and Curricular Practical Training (CPT) programs.

In addition, there is broad bipartisan support to retain talent in the U.S.; however, there are only limited opportunities for international students to continue to contribute their skills and training in the U.S. upon completion of their course of study. **The Biden-Harris administration should prioritize increasing opportunities for international students to gain practical experience and extending pathways for eligible international students to remain in the U.S.**

Conclusion

The economic health of the U.S. depends on the strength of the country's workforce; and immigrants, refugees, and international students are vital to supporting our nation's economic recovery and stability. The Biden-Harris administration must take bold action to support immigrant and refugee integration and ensure international student mobility so that all people have an opportunity to contribute their education, experience, and talent in the U.S.

ⁱ Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, "New Brain Gain: Rising Human Capital among Recent Immigrants to the United States," Migration Policy Institute, (July 2017). <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/new-brain-gain-rising-human-capital-among-recent-immigrants-united-states>.

ⁱⁱ Robert T. Teranishi, Carola Suárez-Orozco, and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, "Immigrants in Community Colleges," *The Future of Children* (2011): 153-169. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ920371.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Department of the Treasury Office of Economic Policy, the Council of Economic Advisers, and the Department of Labor, "Occupational Licensing: A Framework for Policymakers," (July 2015). https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/licensing_report_final_nonembargo.pdf

^{iv} Julie Baer and Mirta Markel, PhD, "Fall 2020 International Student Enrollment Snapshot" Institute of International Education, (November 2020). <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/11/16/survey-new-international-enrollments-drop-43-percent-fall>

^v Department of Homeland Security, "Open Doors Report: International Students Contribute \$44.7 Billion to the U.S.: Study in the States," (November 2019). <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/2019/11/open-doors-report-international-students-contribute-447-billion-us>

^{vi} Kenneth Megan and Theresa Cardinal Brown, "Barring International Students Could Cost Universities Billions," Bipartisan Policy Center, (July 2020). <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/barring-international-students-could-cost-universities-billions/>

^{vii} NAFSA: Association of International Educators, "Losing Talent: An Economic and Foreign Policy Risk America Can't Ignore," (March 2020). <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/losing-talent-economic-and-foreign-policy-risk-america-cant-ignore>



About WES

World Education Services Inc. (WES) is a 501(c)3 non-profit social enterprise dedicated to helping international students, immigrants, and refugees achieve their educational and workplace goals in the United States and Canada. WES evaluates and advocates for the recognition of international education qualifications, supports the integration of immigrants into the workforce, and provides philanthropic funding to immigrant-serving organizations. Over more than 45 years, WES has provided credential evaluations to nearly three million individuals from around the globe.