



Spring 2022 Newsletter

## **Refugee Voice Project: Understanding College Access and Inclusion**

Community Campus Collaborative Refugee Voice Project

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*Please take a moment to view [this short film](#) which was created in partnership with Welcome.US, a new national initiative built to inspire, mobilize, and empower Americans from all corners of the country to welcome and support those seeking refuge here.*

There is limited research examining college access and support for refugees and immigrants.

One study suggests that higher education administrators must develop refugee-specific programming<sup>1</sup>, and another highlights the need to shift focus from English-language proficiency and recognize that students' limited participation in college is not simply because of their limited English abilities, but additional “structural constraints unique to this population.”<sup>2</sup>

The Community Campus Collaborative in Upstate New York is responding to this need through the Refugee Voice Project by documenting the experiences of refugees as they navigate the college application process, developing leaders within the refugee community to build a mentoring program, and creating an online resource hub for refugees navigating the college application process.

Importantly, this project places current and prospective college students at the center of the work to foster empowered and informed decisions, and collaboratively build more inclusive and responsive higher education institutions.

### **Laying the Groundwork**

Principal Investigators prioritized securing compensated — credit-bearing or paid — opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to build the foundation of the Refugee Voice project. They leveraged existing programs that support student research and civic engagement, including New York State's Collegiate Science & Technology Entry Program, Siena College's AmeriCorps Vista program and Sage's community work-study program.

Students conducted mixed-methods ethnographic research at the Refugee Welcome Center (RWC), and organized College Access events for young adults in the neighborhood, featuring representatives from admissions, financial aid, and student success offices. The relationships that emerged from these informal gatherings led to several opportunities for continued mentorship.

Twelve young adults who identify as “newcomers” (refugees or immigrants) signed up for ongoing individual support with Refugee Voice student leaders, assisting with everything from exploratory preparation (what to expect in a seminar class, for example) to completing financial aid forms. One high school senior had applied to college and received no financial aid because she also worked full-time as the sole provider in her household, with an income of \$23,000. Our students helped her navigate a financial aid appeal, and she is now receiving aid and enrolled in college part-time.

These experiences provided immediate support and allowed PIs and students to better understand newcomers’ priorities and concerns, all of which inform the next stages of the project. Students then developed evidence-based score cards<sup>3</sup> and rated seven local colleges, including public, private, two-year, and four-year institutions. They identified areas for improvement and presented their findings to administrators. Their recommendations were well-received and led to robust discussions.

### **Adapting to Community Needs**

Our Refugee Voice Project has been situated in the context of a rapidly changing and expanding refugee crisis.

In August 2021, as the geopolitical and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan unfolded, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants’ Albany field office (USCRI) was preparing for an unprecedented influx of refugees. Our Afghan neighbors were in crisis, and our nonprofit partners were in triage. We knew this was a time to step up, listen, and adapt the ways we were supporting our community.

We widened our focus to provide responsive support, and ultimately launched an ‘Intercultural Cafe’ on campus, offering weekly wellness activities including creative arts therapies, yoga, meditation, and cooking. This has developed into a supportive activity-based English language learning community, adapting to the various needs of our new neighbors of all ages.

A team of six Sage faculty, staff, students, and alumni have formed the area’s first “Good Neighbor Team” and have been providing direct support to a family of nine from Afghanistan.

As the pilot partner, Sage is helping USCRI lay the groundwork for more successful teams of Good Neighbors. Sage’s involvement also helped students and faculty prepare for its collaboration with Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR).

Founded by BT2P TWF cohort member Diya Abdo, ECAR is a nonprofit that mobilizes colleges to make campus resources available to refugee families.

In early 2022, Russell Sage College and Siena College became the first ECAR chapters in New York State, hosting Afghan families of two and three, respectively.

## Looking Ahead

We remain committed to our original goals: to create the space for refugees, immigrants, and other students of color to navigate their post-secondary decision-making process, and simultaneously to help reimagine a more inclusive, sustainable, and equitable landscape of higher education in New York State's Capital Region and beyond.

At the same time, the partnerships fostered by the BT2P TWF project has positioned institutions of higher education in the region to become actively involved in the necessary and pressing aspects of refugee resettlement. Our increased involvement with direct refugee support will allow us to approach our collaborative and evolving Refugee Voice projects with a deeper understanding of the complex and varied realities of our new neighbors.

1: Streitwieser, B., Loo, B., Ohorodnik, M., & Jeong, J. (2019). Access for refugees into higher education: A review of interventions in North America and Europe. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(4), 473-496.

2: Kanno, Yasuko, and Manka M. Varghese. "Immigrant and refugee ESL students' challenges to accessing four-year college education: From language policy to educational policy." *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 9.5 (2010): 310-328.

3: Escher, J. (2018, January 17). *Community score cards-a powerful tool to improve public services*. Civil Society Academy. <https://www.civilsocietyacademy.org/post/community-score-cards-a-powerful-tool>