

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Steps To Success:

INTEGRATING IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS IN THE U.S.

By Amanda Bergson-Shilcock & James Witte, Ph.D.
with editorial assistance from Sylvia Rusin



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Abstract

Using both an online written survey and an interactive voice response audio survey, World Education Services (WES), IMPRINT, and the Institute for Immigration Research at George Mason University gathered detailed data from college-educated immigrants in the United States. The survey focused on the metropolitan areas of Boston, Detroit, Miami, Philadelphia, San Jose, and Seattle. The study analyzed factors that have influenced immigrants' professional success, finding that English skills, social capital, and U.S. workplace acculturation, as well as where one's higher education was obtained, were all strongly correlated with economic and professional achievement.

About the Authors

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Amanda Bergson-Shilcock is Senior Policy Analyst at the National Skills Coalition (NSC), focusing on immigration, adult basic education and English as a Second Language. She analyzes policies, makes recommendations, and coordinates with NSC member organizations to address issues facing adult learners, including immigrant workers. Amanda has authored numerous publications and policy recommendations on immigrant integration, workforce development, and adult education. Amanda joined NSC in 2015. Prior to joining NSC, Amanda was Vice President of Policy and Evaluation at the nonprofit Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians in Philadelphia. In that role, she led the Welcoming Center's policy and communications work on adult education, workforce and economic development issues. She also served as Policy and Communications Director for IMPRINT. Amanda holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, where she studied American Civilization with an emphasis on minority populations. She is based in Philadelphia and Washington, DC.

I. Executive Summary

IMPRINT and its home organization World Education Services (WES) received funding from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to conduct a study to better understand how college-educated immigrant professionals integrate into the U.S. workforce. Focusing our research in the four Knight communities of Detroit, Miami, Philadelphia, and San Jose — and the additional metropolitan areas of Boston and Seattle — we collected information from what is typically a hard-to-reach population to determine the factors that have influenced their success in the workforce.

The online study surveyed 4,002 respondents, producing exciting new findings which shed light — for the first time — on the essential role that social capital, English skills, workplace acculturation and other factors play in helping immigrant professionals succeed. These thought-provoking results provide an opportunity for service providers, funders, and policymakers to think in new ways about how to facilitate immigrant professionals' abilities to contribute to and participate in American communities. The findings are summarized below, and described in more detail in our full report at imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess

Key Findings

Our study examined immigrant achievement using three definitions of success (*see text box*). Using these definitions, we analyzed factors that correlated with the economic success and professional integration of college-educated immigrants at two income thresholds: \$30,000 and \$50,000 per year. Our reasons for selecting these thresholds can be found in the “Findings” section of our full report.

How We Defined Success

The three definitions can be viewed as incremental levels of success, each one building upon the last:

Earnings success refers to immigrants who were currently employed and making at least \$50,000 per year.

Skills success refers to immigrants who were employed, making at least \$50,000 **and** making at least “some use” of their higher education in their current job.

Professional success refers to immigrants who were employed, making at least \$50,000, making at least “some use” of their higher education on the job, **and** employed in managerial or professional occupations.

We also analyzed the three definitions explained above at a lower income threshold of \$30,000 in annual income. Immigrants who fit these definitions were categorized as having *emerging* earnings, skills, or professional success.

Findings across all of our definitions of success were robust, statistically significant, and mutually reinforcing, which strengthened our belief that they shed important light on the process of immigrant professional integration. Overall, approximately one-third of respondents (31%) in our study had achieved earnings success, 28% had achieved skills success, and 22% had attained professional success. It is important to note that these numbers represent increasingly stringent analyses of the same pool of respondents — they are *not* mutually exclusive categories.

More specifically, we learned quite a bit about what actually increases employment for immigrant professionals, and how members of this community are living and working in the U.S. In particular:

- **Social Capital is Powerful:** There was a remarkably powerful correlation between the size of an immigrant’s self-reported social network and his or her likelihood of achieving success. Nearly half of respondents (44%) who reported currently having “many” friends and family in the U.S. to rely on had achieved earnings success, compared to 30% of those with “a few” and just 25% of respondents with “no” friends and family to rely on in the U.S.
- **English Really Matters:** Across the board, stronger English language skills were correlated with virtually every possible measure of immigrant economic success. Nearly half of respondents (40%) who reported speaking English as their primary language had achieved earnings success.
- **Immigrants Take An Enterprising Approach:** Immigrants demonstrated an enterprising, multi-pronged approach to establishing their American careers. A majority of respondents had applied for foreign academic credential evaluation. Self-improvement strategies – such as enrolling in English language classes or pursuing additional U.S. higher education – were also commonly pursued.
- **“Made in America” Boosts Employability:** Immigrants who had invested in additional U.S. education were more likely to be employed and successful than those who had only received education abroad.
- **Time + Acculturation Help Drive Success:** The virtuous cycle of acculturation, social capital and time combined to foster greater success among respondents who had lived in the U.S. for at least six years. In particular, these respondents had on average significantly higher incomes, lower rates of unemployment, and better English skills.

They were also more likely to have volunteered in their communities, and were twice as likely to say they had “many” friends and family compared to respondents who arrived in the U.S. more recently.

- **Newshounds Are Also Volunteers:** Intriguingly, there was a strong, statistically significant relationship between the number of news sources that a respondent reported using, and his or her likelihood of serving as a volunteer. These indicators of *civic* integration may also help to improve the understanding of *economic* integration among immigrant professionals.

Moving Forward

Our findings provided crucial data to inform recommendations not only for our own work at IMPRINT, but also for practitioners, funders, and policymakers in the field. Among these are:

- **Recommendations for Service Providers:** Our findings provide powerful evidence about the importance of social capital, English skills, self-improvement, civic engagement and additional U.S. education in achieving economic success. Service providers must ensure that the college-educated immigrants they serve have a full understanding of how these qualities can help them get a leg up in the competitive job arena. We hope our research will be reviewed carefully and in concert with other findings to inform new program development, and that service providers will actively work to build connections between so-called “mainstream” career programs and those designed specifically for immigrant professionals.
- **Recommendations for Funders:** We hope these findings will spark grants for new education, training, and employment programs for college-educated immigrant professionals, and that additional funding will be used to help

supplement existing streams of public funding that are restricted in their ability to support this work. We also hope that foundations will support follow-up research to help practitioners design more effective programs, enabling the success rate to climb higher.

- **Recommendations for Policymakers:** After a decade of budget cuts, we urge the restoration of funding to existing public workforce and adult education programs that serve college-educated immigrant professionals, and that public agencies better utilize data from existing resources in order to improve services and information. Finally, we encourage public agencies to look within government to identify potential opportunities for immigrant professionals to acquire valuable American work experience.

Read the full report at:

imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess

II. Introduction

The U.S. is home to approximately 3.7 million college-educated immigrants who received their degrees abroad. However, 26% of these skilled workers, or just under one million people, are unemployed or under-employed in low-wage jobs, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

This so-called “brain waste” has significant repercussions for individual workers, their families, and our wider society. When an engineer is working as a janitor, or a nurse is employed as a cashier, their artificially limited income reduces their ability to provide for their families while also capping contributions to the tax base. At the same time, employers who need to access talent in high-demand fields such as science, information technology (IT), engineering and finance may be unaware of how to connect with the many qualified, skilled immigrants already in the country.

This report provides:

- A deeper and more detailed understanding of the college-educated immigrant talent pool in four Knight communities (Detroit, Miami, Philadelphia and San Jose) and two other metro areas (Boston and Seattle);
- A first-of-its-kind analysis of the specific factors that have helped accomplished immigrant professionals achieve professional success in the United States; and
- A systematic cataloguing of self-reported barriers and obstacles faced by college-educated immigrants who have not yet achieved professional-level employment.

We anticipate that the findings will be used to improve existing programs for immigrant profes-

sionals, provide guidance for those who are designing and funding new programs for this population; and inform policy and funding conversations not only in the six target communities, but also nationally.

IMPRINT brings a strong practitioner focus to the analysis, helping to ensure that this report will be as relevant as possible to the interests of service providers, funders and policymakers. In a stroke of luck, the release of this study coincides with the work of the White House Task Force on New Americans, which is lifting up efforts to more effectively integrate immigrants across the nation. We anticipate that this synergistic timing will boost the ability of our study to inform the national discussion about immigrant professional integration.

It is important to note that, to the best of our knowledge, all previous studies conducted on immigrant professionals in the United States used existing national datasets. None conducted original data collection. None compared the trajectories of successful versus still-struggling immigrant professionals. None attempted to document the opportunities that helped individual respondents succeed or the specific barriers that held them back.

This study documents factors that have helped successful immigrant professionals avoid the trap of under-employment and overcome the barriers they face. We collected previously unseen data from a hard-to-reach population, drew on our extensive practitioner experience in analyzing the data, and now offer practical recommendations for action.

From the beginning, IMPRINT’s deep expertise in immigrant communities informed our survey design. Guided by an academic research team, we were able to delve more deeply and accurately into community members’ stories.

The project was carried out by IMPRINT and its host organization, World Education Services (WES). We worked closely with researchers at the Institute for Immigration Research at George Mason University on survey design and analysis, and each of IMPRINT's five core member organizations called on their networks in the relevant cities to help disseminate the survey to potential respondents. In addition to WES Global Talent Bridge, IMPRINT members include the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE), Upwardly Global, the Welcome Back Initiative and the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians.

Along with this report, we have simultaneously released a case study spotlighting the project's innovative use of AudioNow's call-to-listen technology to survey hard-to-reach immigrant populations.

We look forward to engaging multiple stakeholders in the nonprofit, business, and public arenas to help spur further discussion and inquiry as well as targeted action on the ground, and invite all readers to contact the authors with questions or comments.

A Note about Region of Origin: Before delving into the details, it is vital to note that many of the differences across various variables according to the region of the world may be due to pipeline effects of immigration policy rather than any factor intrinsic to a world region or group of individuals. For example, Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants are disproportionately likely to immigrate to the U.S. via employment-based visas. This immigration pathway naturally correlates with higher rates of employment (because individuals on work visas often need to leave the U.S. if they lose their jobs). Similarly, African immigrants may be more likely to arrive through student visas, thus making it more likely that they have completed U.S.-based higher education.

These policy-driven pipeline effects should be kept in mind when reviewing the report's detailed findings.

Online vs. Audio Survey Respondents: What's the Difference?

Our research project included a lengthy online survey, available in four languages, which gathered information from a total of 4,002 college-educated immigrants in the United States. The survey focused in particular on six metropolitan areas: Boston, Detroit, Miami, Philadelphia, San Jose, and Seattle. Respondents from other parts of the U.S. were included only in the national-level analysis.

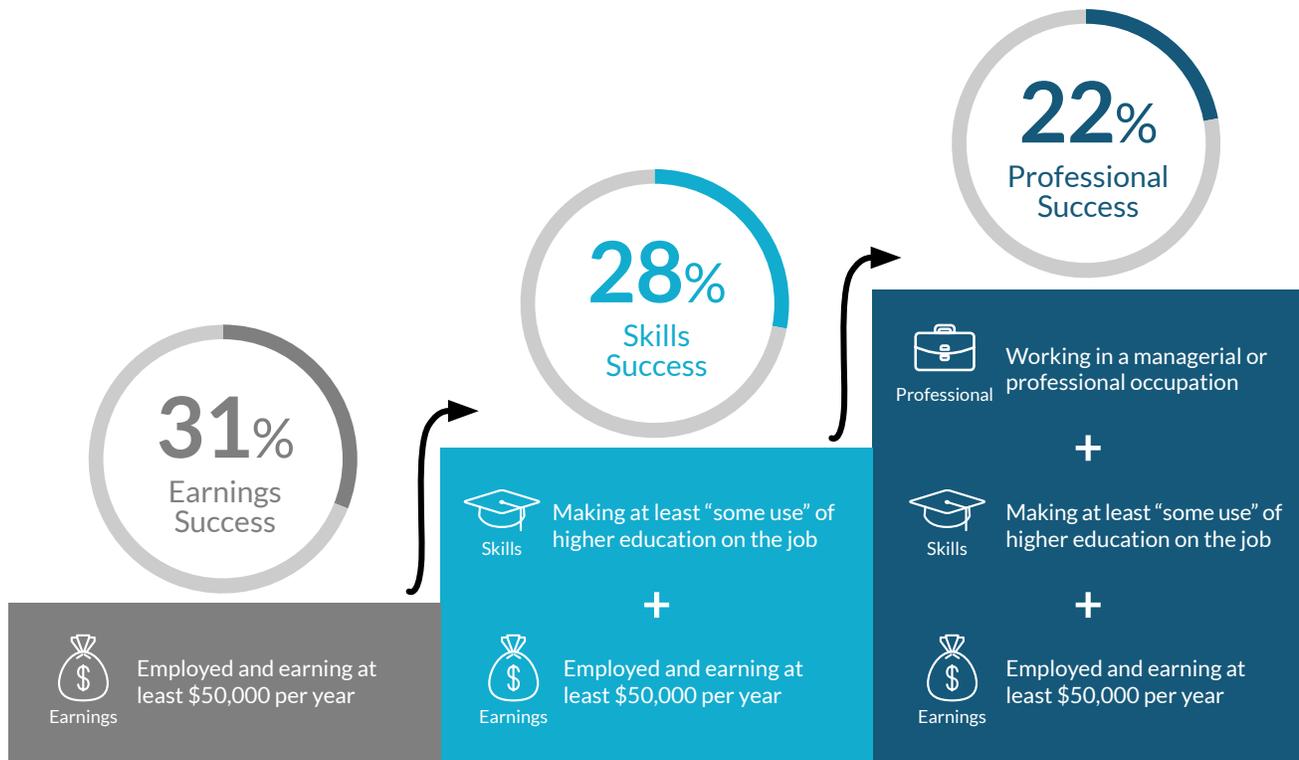
Simultaneously, we also engaged over 5,500 respondents in an audio survey of immigrant radio listeners. This significantly briefer survey was conducted in five languages, in collaboration with AudioNow, the leading provider of this "radio-by-phone" technology.

Unlike the online survey, the audio survey included both college-educated immigrants and those with lower levels of education. Again, the survey focused on the six metro areas. Respondents from other parts of the U.S. were included in the national-level analysis.

Learn more about the audio component of our survey in **Surveying Immigrant Radio Listeners: A Case Study**, available at

imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess

III. Steps to Success: Key Findings



Measures of success reflect increasingly-stringent analysis of the same data pool.

Figure 1. Definitions of Success

This study's new findings have documented for the first time the vital role of social capital, English skills, and workplace acculturation in helping immigrant professionals succeed in the U.S. workforce. The results emphasize the need for purposeful integration strategies, ones that build on immigrants' technical skills, international credentials, and professional experience but do not solely rely on them.

In addition, findings showed meaningful differences in outcomes depending on where – in the U.S. versus abroad – individuals received their higher education. These results suggest that different strategies may be needed for individuals whose education was entirely international versus those who received at least some higher education in the United States.

To answer the study's central question of what factors affect the trajectory of college-educated immigrants, we analyzed our dataset using three increasingly stringent definitions of success. **Findings across all three were robust, statistically significant, and mutually reinforcing**, which strengthened our belief that they shed important light on the process of immigrant professional integration.

How We Defined "Success"

Across all three definitions of success, we used a common universe of respondents: those who were in the labor force. Whether or not respondents had found employment, we viewed *the decision to enter the labor force* as the strongest available

signal that respondents were actively seeking economic advancement.¹

Our first working definition of success, earnings success, refers to the percentage of respondents who were currently employed, and making at least \$50,000 per year.

Of course, an income of \$50,000 substantially exceeds the median U.S. individual income of approximately \$28,000. However, we are comparing our respondents not to the general public, but to *those with higher education*. Given that restriction, U.S. median individual income ranges from approximately \$40,000 (for individuals with some college or an associate's degree) to \$62,000 (for those with a bachelor's degree or higher).² Selecting \$50,000 as our threshold thus seemed a natural midpoint.³

Our second and third definitions of success focused not only on income but also on respondents' ability to apply their education and training.

Skills success refers to respondents who were employed, making at least \$50,000, *and* making at least "some use" of their higher education (whether obtained in the U.S. or outside the U.S.) in their current job.

Finally, professional success refers to respondents who were employed, making at least \$50,000 per year, making "some use" of their higher education on the job, *and* employed in a managerial or professional occupation.

Overall, 31% of IMPRINT respondents had achieved earnings success, 28% had achieved skills success, and 22% had attained professional success. It is important to note that these numbers represent progressively more stringent analyses of the same pool of respondents—they are *not* mutually exclusive categories.

Analyzing the Earlier Rungs of Success

We also analyzed our data using a lower financial threshold for success: \$30,000. While this income level might seem modest, it slightly exceeds the United States median per capita income, as noted above.

Applying this new financial threshold to the three definitions of success described at the beginning of this chapter, we found that approximately half of respondents (47%) had attained the first tier of success, which we term *emerging earnings success*.

Slightly fewer (40%) exhibited *emerging skills success*, and just under one-third (30%) showed *emerging professional success*.

We also analyzed each of the individual variables associated with success using the \$30,000 "*emerging*" threshold. Findings were overwhelmingly consistent with the \$50,000 threshold findings described in this chapter, though of course relatively more respondents had attained this lower level of financial stability.

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who achieved these three definitions of success, as well as those who achieved these definitions under a lower financial threshold of \$30,000 and may potentially be on the pathway to the \$50,000 threshold.⁴ *See text box for more details.* **Below, we detail key factors associated with respondents' achievements.**

The Power of Social Capital

There was a remarkably powerful correlation between the size of an immigrant's self-reported social network and their likelihood of achieving success across any of the three measures.

For example, nearly half of respondents (44%) who reported currently having “many” friends and family in the U.S. to rely on had achieved earnings success. In comparison, 30% of those with “a few” and just 25% of respondents with “no” friends and family to rely on in the U.S. had achieved earnings success.

Similarly, 41% of respondents with “many” friends and family in the U.S. had achieved skills success, compared to 28% of those with “a few” and just 20% of respondents who had “no” friends and family to rely on.

Findings on professional success also affirmed the primacy of social capital. Respondents who reported having “many” friends and family in the U.S. were more than twice as likely to have achieved professional success as those with “no” friends and family (34% to 15%). Those with “a few” friends or family fell in the middle at 22%.

A Key Role for English

Numerous findings affirm the central role of English language skills in facilitating immigrants’ integration, especially in improving their prospects for white-collar employment. Across the board in our study, stronger English language skills were correlated with virtually every possible measure of immigrant economic success.

Across the board in our study, stronger English language skills were correlated with virtually every possible measure of immigrant economic success.

Respondents themselves were keenly aware of the importance of English skills. Significantly, they were just as likely to have invested in *fee-based* English classes as they were to have attended *free* ones: exactly 31% of respondents reported having pursued free classes, and 29% attended fee-based classes.⁵

Notably, respondents who had taken an English language class had *lower* self-reported English skills. Our survey does not permit us to disentangle the factors at work here, though it is likely that immigrants who perceive themselves to have limited English skills were more likely to have pursued classes to improve their linguistic capacity.

Similarly, our survey did not inquire about the duration or intensity of the classes taken by respondents, and it is not possible in our data to assess the efficacy of respondents’ English language instruction in terms of labor market outcomes. These issues are discussed further in our Policy Recommendations section.

English Skills and Success

Among the subset of respondents who were non-native speakers of English, better English skills were strongly correlated with achieving earnings success. A full third (34%) of those who speak⁶ English “very

Table 1. Percentage of Respondents Achieving Success

\$30,000 INCOME THRESHOLD			\$50,000 INCOME THRESHOLD		
EMERGING EARNINGS SUCCESS	EMERGING SKILLS SUCCESS	EMERGING PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS	EARNINGS SUCCESS	SKILLS SUCCESS	PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS
47%	40%	30%	31%	28%	22%

well” had achieved earnings success, compared to 17% of those who speak English “well” and just 10% of those who speak English “not well.”

There was a similarly strong correlation between self-reported English skills and achievement of skills success. Those who speak English “very well” were far more likely (32%) to have achieved skills success, compared to those who speak English “well” (13%) or “not well” (8%).

Finally, among respondents who did not speak English as a primary language, those with strong English skills were dramatically more likely to have achieved professional success. Those who spoke English “very well” were three times more likely (27%) to have attained professional success than those who spoke English “well” (9%). Just 3% of English “not well” speakers had achieved professional success.

English as Primary Language and Success

Unsurprisingly, immigrants who spoke English as their *primary* language were more likely to have achieved earnings success, at 40% compared to 28% of those with another primary language.

Individuals who spoke English as a primary language were also more likely to have achieved skills success (37%) compared to non-native speakers (26%). Finally, the trend continues for professional success, where respondents for whom English is a primary language were more likely to have achieved it (30%) to those with other primary languages (21%).

ESOL Classes and Success

Respondents who did not speak English as their primary language and who had taken an English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) class (free or

fee-based) were slightly *less* likely to have achieved earnings success, at 25% compared to 35% of those who had not taken a class.

Those who had taken an ESOL class (free or fee-based) were also slightly *less* likely to have achieved skills success, at 22% compared to 32% of those who had not taken a class.

Finally, those who had taken an ESOL class were also slightly *less* likely to have achieved professional success, at 17% compared to 26% of those who had not taken a class.

Again, as noted above, there were myriad factors that may have affected this finding. We would caution against making any assumptions about the efficacy or value of English language instruction based on this data. Future research on English language instruction and immigrant economic success is needed for further analysis.

An Enterprising Approach

Our findings suggest that college-educated immigrants take an enterprising, multi-pronged approach to establishing their American careers.

Many seek to translate their foreign credentials into U.S. terms, with nearly two-thirds (63%) reporting that they applied for a formal credential evaluation.

Self-improvement tactics—such as taking English language classes or pursuing additional U.S. higher education—were also common. Half (50%) of respondents who had received higher education abroad had *also* pursued higher education in the United States, and 43% of respondents had taken an English language class.

In addition, half of overall respondents (49%) said they were interested in doing more to improve

their skills, including 24% who plan to be or are currently in training.

A more modest percentage (34%) of overall respondents had applied for U.S. professional licensure. This smaller number is not surprising, as only a minority of professional-class jobs in the U.S. even require such licensure. Among the subset who had applied, 69% had been granted licensure, 24% were waiting for a response and 7% were denied licensure.

Looking at some of the above variables in terms of our definitions of success, several key themes emerge:

Credential Evaluation

Interestingly, there was little difference between whether a respondent's foreign credentials had been "fully recognized" or "partially recognized" when it came to success. Those whose credentials were "not at all recognized," on the other hand, suffered significantly poorer outcomes on average.

Among individuals who had applied for credential evaluations, the difference in earnings success between respondents whose credentials were "fully recognized" (33%) was almost indistinguishable from those who had been "partially recognized" (35%). The number then fell sharply to 14% for those who said their credentials were "not recognized."

The pattern was similar for skills success. Among individuals who had applied for credential evaluations, 31% of those who said their credentials had been "fully recognized" had achieved skills success, as well as 34% of those whose credentials were "partially recognized." Again, the number fell

sharply to 12% for those who said their credentials were "not recognized."

Finally, the number of respondents achieving professional success was identical (25%) among those whose credentials were "fully" or "partially" recognized. In contrast, just 10% of those whose credentials were "not recognized" had achieved professional success.

Licensure

While only a minority (34%) of overall respondents had applied for U.S. professional licensure, those who *had* successfully attained it were far more likely to be successful than those who

had applied and had been denied. This pattern held true across every measure of success we calculated.

Location of Higher Education

As noted above, the signaling value of "Made in America" higher education was significant. Immigrants who received some or all of their higher education in the U.S. were more likely to succeed under each of our three definitions.

However, differences were almost indistinguishable between immigrants who had received "blended" education and those who were educated exclusively in the U.S., suggesting that even partial American education is sufficient to add value in the labor market.

Approximately 22% of immigrants who had completed all of their higher education abroad had achieved earnings success, compared to 37% of those who had received higher education both in the U.S. and abroad, and 40% of those who had received higher education only in the U.S.

There was little difference between whether a respondent's foreign credentials had been "fully recognized" or "partially recognized" when it came to success.

Similarly, 19% of respondents who completed all of their higher education abroad had achieved *skills success*, compared to 35% of immigrants who had received higher education both abroad and in the U.S., and an equal 35% of those who had received all of their higher education in the U.S.

Finally, immigrants who had received higher education only abroad were less likely to have achieved professional success, at 15%. In comparison, 28% of those who had received higher education both in the U.S. and abroad, and an equivalent 28% of those with U.S.-only higher education, had attained professional success.

Differences were almost indistinguishable between immigrants who had received “blended” education and those who were educated exclusively in the U.S., suggesting that even partial American education is sufficient to add value in the labor market.

Similarly, those who had lived in the U.S. for six years or more had significantly lower rates of unemployment, better English skills, and were more likely to have volunteered their time to a neighborhood or civic group, religious organization, or ethnic association.

Disentangling the cause and effect of these various factors is challenging, but it is clear that they often reinforce each other. For example, an individual’s better English skills may make it easier

for him or her to make friends in the neighborhood, leading to volunteer opportunities. Or the process of volunteering at a religious organization with English-speaking congregants may lead to improved language skills or stronger networks.

Below, we analyze two of these variables with regard to our definitions of success.

Length of Time in the U.S.

Not surprisingly, immigrants who had been in the U.S. for at least six years were far more likely to have achieved earnings success — at 40%, compared to 15% of those who had been in the U.S. for five years or less.

A Virtuous Cycle

Acculturation, social capital, and time came together in a virtuous combination for many respondents. Those who had lived in the U.S. for at least six years had significantly higher incomes on average, and were twice as likely to say they had “many” friends and family in the U.S. compared to respondents who had arrived in the past five years.

Table 2. Percentage of Licensure Applicants Who Achieved Success

	LICENSED TO PRACTICE & ACHIEVED SUCCESS	DENIED LICENSE & ACHIEVED SUCCESS
Earnings success*	46%	24%
Skills Success**	43%	20%
Professional Success**	36%	11%

*p < .05, **p < .01

Figure 2. Success by Age Group



Similarly, individuals who had lived in the U.S. for at least six years were three times more likely to have achieved skills success (36% compared to 12% of newer arrivals).

On average, professional success also takes longer to achieve, with 29% of more-established individuals having achieved it compared to just 9% of respondents who had arrived in the past five years.

Age

Unsurprisingly, individuals' likelihood of achieving success went up with age. Just 9% of those who were ages 18-24 had achieved earnings success, quite likely because many were still in school or recently graduated. In comparison, 25% of those aged 25-34 had achieved earnings success, 36% of those 35-44, 41% of those 45-54, 44% of those age 55-64, and 28% of those ages 65 and up.⁷

Older respondents were also more likely to have achieved skills success. Just 7% of immigrants age 18–24 had done so. The number tripled to 22% of those ages 25–34, and rose again to 33% of those 35–44. Rounding out the list, 37% of those 45–54, 41% of those 55–64 and 24% of respondents 65 and over had achieved skills success.

Finally, older respondents were far more likely to have accomplished professional success, again with the exception of the very oldest respondents. Just 3% of those in the youngest age category were professionally successful, compared to 17% of those ages 25–34, 27% of those 35–44, 29% of those 45–54, 33% of those 55–64, and 19% of those 65 and older.

Embracing Opportunity and Overcoming Barriers

As noted above, an overwhelming percentage (88%) of immigrants in our survey were in the labor force. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of overall respondents were currently employed, and 19% were unemployed and actively seeking work.⁸

While some of this is doubtless a reflection of the age cohort – the vast majority of respondents were between 18 and 65 – it bears noting nevertheless. In particular, the broad range of earnings reported by our respondents suggests that college-educated immigrants embrace employment first, even if the wages may not reflect their level of education and training. Only a relative few can afford to bide their time waiting for exactly the right employment opportunity.

With regard to seeking work, respondents pursued a variety of tactics, with an average of 3.1 job-hunting techniques reported among overall respondents.

The broad range of earnings reported by our respondents suggests that college-educated immigrants embrace employment first, even if the wages may not reflect their level of education and training.

Respondents also strove to overcome barriers—such as lack of U.S. work experience, difficulties with English, or personal or financial constraints—in their search for employment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, immigrants who reported facing few or no barriers in their search were far more likely to have achieved earnings success.

It is difficult to say whether this finding is a cause or effect, however, as respondents may have been more likely to remember or to list barriers in their survey responses if they were experiencing labor market frustration.

Nearly half (47%) of respondents who reported facing “no barriers” had achieved earnings success. In contrast, 33% of those who reported one barrier, 26% of those facing two barriers, 24% facing three barriers, and 18% of respondents facing four or more barriers had done so.

Similarly, 44% of those who reported facing “no barriers” had attained skills success, compared to 29% of those who faced one barrier, 23% of those facing two barriers, and 20% of those facing three barriers. Finally, approximately 15% of those facing four or more barriers had achieved skills success.

Lastly, those who faced “no barriers” were again most likely to have achieved professional success (36%). The number dropped notably among those facing even one barrier (23%), and continued to drop for those facing two barriers (18%), three barriers (16%), and four or more barriers (approximately 10%).

Becoming Voters Over Time

Across numerous variables, our data confirms that respondents were more likely to be registered voters if they were older, have lived in the U.S. for a longer period of time, if they received at least some higher education in the U.S., if they were currently employed, and if their income was at least \$30,000 per year.

These factors were consistent with overall U.S. voter registration patterns. It is important to note that our data do not establish a causal effect – that is, we cannot say (for example) that the mere fact of being employed causes a person to decide to register as a voter.

However, the sheer consistency of the data across numerous variables does suggest that immigrant civic integration is typically the product of multiple simultaneous factors: Longer tenure in the U.S. means a greater likelihood of becoming eligible for citizenship (and thus voting) while also increasing the chance of finding employment and advancing in the workforce to higher-paying jobs.

More Friends, More Voting

Across the board, respondents who report having more friends and family in the U.S. were more likely to be registered to vote. This pattern holds true even when we limit our analysis to the subset of respondents who were eligible to vote *and* have lived in the U.S. for more than five years. In that case, nearly four out of five (77%) respondents who say they have “many” friends and family in the U.S. that they can rely on were registered to vote, compared to 65% of those who have “a few,” and 63% of those who have “no” friends and family.

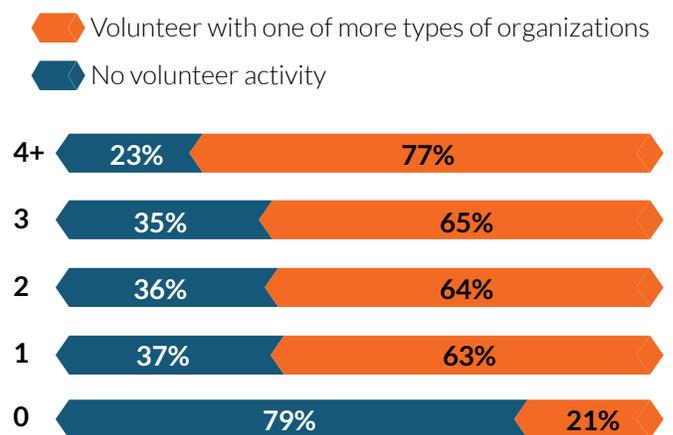
Across the board, respondents who report having more friends and family in the U.S. were more likely to be registered to vote.

Newshounds Are Also Volunteers

There was a strong, statistically significant relationship between the number of news sources that a respondent reported using and the likelihood of volunteering. Our data asked respondents whether they had accessed any one of a number of potential news sources on the previous day. We also asked whether the respondent had volunteered with any one of a number of types of organizations in the previous year.

The overwhelming majority (79%) of respondents who reported zero access to news sources also reported no volunteer activity. The pattern changed abruptly among respondents who reported even one source of news, with a majority (63%) now reporting they *had* volunteered. The likelihood of volunteering continued to increase with each additional news source. **Figure 3** displays these details.

Figure 3. Volunteer Participation by Number of News Sources Used



IV. Recommendations

Our findings provide crucial data to inform recommendations for service providers, funders, and policymakers who are seeking to tap the talents of underutilized skilled immigrants.

For Service Providers

There is powerful evidence of the importance of social capital, English skills, self-improvement, and additional U.S. education in achieving economic success. We hope our study will inform the development of new programs that help immigrant jobseekers understand and develop the competencies that will help them succeed in the U.S. labor market, and that providers will actively connect services designed specifically for immigrant professionals with so-called “mainstream” programs. Our specific recommendations include:

1. **Ensure that direct-service staff, and the immigrant professionals they serve, fully understand the importance of English skills in achieving economic success.** Ours is far from the first study to show strong correlations between English language fluency and economic success. However, our specific focus on immigrant professionals amplifies the importance of this finding for this specific population. The message is clear: For limited English proficient immigrant professionals, investing in English language training is likely the single most powerful step an individual can take toward his or her future employability.

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2. **Communicate to immigrant jobseekers the vital role of networking and the strength of “weak ties” in the U.S. employment search.** Among U.S.-born jobseekers, these job-search techniques are widely known and are a key factor in gaining referrals to hidden job opportunities, yet a relatively low percentage of our respondents reported using these approaches. Given the strong correlation between possessing strong social capital and reporting better economic outcomes, it is imperative that immigrant professionals be not only informed about, but prepared to actively exercise, networking skills in their independent job searches. Practitioners should actively assess how immigrant professionals are currently building and utilizing social capital, and — having done so — help jobseekers develop the networking skills required to conduct white-collar job searches in the U.S.

3. **Educate immigrant professionals on the potential value of obtaining short-term “Made in America” supplements to their international education and experience.** Numerous findings in our report point to U.S. employers’ strong preference for American experience and training. Immigrant professionals often acquire this asset the expensive way — by investing additional years and thousands of dollars in U.S. higher education, in many cases repeating an unnecessary course of study already mastered in their home country. More cost-effective ways of acquiring the “Made in America” stamp include facilitating immigrants’ exploration of other opportunities (e.g. short-term

certificates, training programs, workplace internships, volunteer experience).

4. **Work to build connections between mainstream career pathways programs and services designed specifically for immigrant professionals.** As the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act is implemented, new opportunities are *emerging* to design “career pathways” that carry participants through multiple stages of education and training. Some short-term credentials available through these pathways may be appropriate for immigrant professionals who are seeking alternative careers or intermediate steps before re-licensing in their original profession.
5. **Provide actionable information on gaps and opportunities to funders and policymakers.** Addressing the needs of immigrant professionals is a highly specialized field. Practitioners in this arena are well-positioned to identify cross-cutting issues affecting the communities they serve, and to develop and iterate potential solutions. Communicating the results of these efforts to elected officials and funders is vital in facilitating their ability to support the expansion and replication of programs that work.

For Funders

We hope these findings will spark grants for new education, training, and employment programs for college-educated immigrants, and that additional funding will be used to help bridge existing streams of public funding that are restricted in their ability to support this work. We also hope that foundations will support additional research to help providers design more effective programs. Our specific recommendations include:

1. **Ensure that support is targeted toward interventions that work.** In particular, programs serving immigrant professionals should include connections to English language learning opportunities at all levels, mechanisms to acquire U.S. workplace experience, and assistance in building and utilizing social capital.
2. **Use philanthropic dollars as a bridge between other funding streams.** Restrictions on public funding often hamper the ability of practitioners to provide services across the full range of supports or length of time necessary to effectively serve immigrant professionals. For example, immigrant professionals are often eligible for entry-level English language classes through the state and federally funded adult education system. However, there are often few resources to support intermediate programs once these participants test out of publicly funded classes and before they qualify for college-level instruction. Philanthropic dollars can provide vital resources to sustain participants’ learning momentum between programs.
3. **Support additional practical research on the efficacy of different types of English language training.** Immigrant professionals are faced with a plethora of options: free and fee-based, college- and community-based, varied degrees of duration, intensity, and quality. Funding rigorous research to identify common factors in positive outcomes would help immigrant professionals become more informed consumers, and help practitioners to develop better designed programs.
4. **Consider sponsoring opportunities for immigrant professionals to build social capital and gain U.S. experience.** Given the importance of social capital in facilitating positive outcomes, funders should consider creative ways to improve immigrant professionals’ ability to acquire and exercise it. Programs such as one-day job shadowing, or even coffee meetings between U.S.-born and immigrant professionals can help to widen newcomers’ local networks. Likewise, given

U.S. employers' strong preference for American experience and training, funders should consider sponsoring "mid-ternships"⁷⁹ or other short-term on-the-job experiences to help immigrant professionals gain American seasoning.

5. **Document and publicize successes.** Across the workforce and adult education fields, the program models that have been most widely adapted are those whose impact has been carefully documented by external evaluators, and well publicized. Programs such as Washington State's I-BEST model spread rapidly across the country thanks in part to a study by Columbia University's Teachers College. Evaluating and lifting up successful programs for skilled immigrants in these ways would be a powerful influence in advancing the field.

For Policymakers

We urge that after a decade of budget cuts, funding be restored to existing public workforce and adult education programs, whose participants include immigrant professionals, and that public agencies better utilize data from existing resources to improve services and information about this population. Finally, we encourage public agencies to look within government to identify potential opportunities for immigrant professionals to acquire valuable American work experience. In particular, we recommend that policymakers:

1. **Fully fund existing public programs in adult education, training, and employment.** At the federal level, such programs have suffered significant cuts over the past decade, and immigrant participation has likewise declined. Funding programs at their fully authorized levels can help to restore the capacity lost to the system, and ensure that eligible immigrant professionals get what they need to succeed.

2. **Improve data collection on immigrant professionals.** Identify opportunities in existing federal programs to collect data on nativity, English language proficiency, and foreign education or credentials, or analyze existing datasets for such information. In order to develop appropriate responses to constituent and community needs, policymakers need high-quality data illustrating the capacity of public programs to serve immigrant professionals.
3. **Use existing infrastructure to improve the quality of service provision.** For example, professional development activities for adult educators and refugee resettlement workers are both provided with federal funds. Policymakers should encourage the use of these existing pathways to improve the knowledge and ability of program staff to serve immigrant professionals.
4. **Similarly, use existing processes to disseminate information to immigrant professionals.** Websites and resources such as WelcometoUSA.gov and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' handbook for new lawful permanent residents are just two examples of mechanisms by which more and better information could be provided to immigrant professionals.
5. **Identify opportunities within government for immigrant professionals to acquire American experience.** Job shadowing, mentoring, internships or "mid-ternships," and other short-term workplace experiences can provide a valuable launching pad for immigrant professionals. Policymakers should consider whether there are opportunities — in the context of existing civil-service structures or otherwise — to facilitate newcomers' acquisition of U.S. experience within public agencies.

For further information visit

imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess

About the Partners

World Education Services (WES.org) led this project through its Global Talent Bridge program. For more than 40 years, WES has helped highly-skilled immigrants in the U.S. and Canada achieve their academic and professional goals by leveraging and utilizing their education and training earned abroad. Through its **Global Talent Bridge program (globaltalentbridge.org)**, WES conducts outreach and provides training, tools and resources designed to ensure the successful integration of immigrant professionals, and serves as host of the IMPRINT coalition.

IMPRINT (imprintproject.org), based at WES, is a national coalition of nonprofit organizations active in the emerging field of immigrant professional integration. Working closely with partners in government, community agencies, higher education, business and other sectors, IMPRINT raises awareness of the talents and contributions of foreign-educated immigrants and refugees. The coalition works to identify and promote best practices and advocates for federal, state and local policies that facilitate the integration of immigrant professionals into the U.S. economy.

Institute for Immigration Research (iir.gmu.edu), the lead research partner on this project, is a joint venture between George Mason University and the Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) of Massachusetts. Its mission is to refocus the immigration conversation among academics, policy-makers and the public, including the business community and media, by producing and disseminating unbiased and objective, interdisciplinary academic research related to immigrants and immigration to the United States.

AudioNow (audionow.com) is the leading call-to-listen platform and provider of interactive mobile applications for broadcasters. Based in Washington D.C., AudioNow connects in-language broadcasters with hard-to-reach diaspora communities worldwide. It hosts broadcasts from more than 2,600 different radio stations in 94 languages, from the U.S., Central America, South Asia, the Philippines, Africa and the Middle East. In 2014, it broadcasted more than 2.5 billion listening minutes.

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (KnightFoundation.org) supports transformational ideas that promote quality journalism, advance media innovation, engage communities and foster the arts. The foundation believes that democracy thrives when people and communities are informed and engaged.



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