NATIONAL IMMIGRATION FORUM

SKILLS AND TRAINING FOR NEW AMERICANS: CREATING A THRIVING ECONOMY THAT WORKS FOR ALL OF US

Introduction

The United States has an important opportunity to tap into and maximize the contributions of the immigrant workforce to ensure a thriving economy that works for Americans. Doing so will benefit our country and communities: Businesses will have an expanded talent pipeline to help them compete, all job seekers and workers will have access to improved employment and training policies and programs, and immigrants and their families will have increased economic mobility.

Our nation's competitiveness declines when talent shortages negatively impact businesses' productivity and innovation.[1] Industry leaders across the country express concern over skills gaps.[2] In 2015, Manpower found that 32 percent of employers in the United States had difficulty filling jobs.[3] By 2020, less than four years from now, the American Action Forum projects that the United States will be short an estimated 7.5 million private sector workers across all skill levels.[4]

Federal, state, and local leaders must implement education, workforce and economic development solutions that prepare a skilled workforce to address the urgent needs of businesses and maintain our nation's global competitiveness. As they do so, they must recognize and address our changing demographics: Currently, the United States population includes more than 42 million immigrants,[5] and by 2060, the foreign-born population is projected to grow to 78 million, an increase of 85 percent.[6] Immigrants and their children are expected to account for all of the labor force growth in the United States in the next 40 years.[7] Thus, building the skills of immigrants is a critical workforce strategy and essential for ensuring U.S. economic competitiveness.

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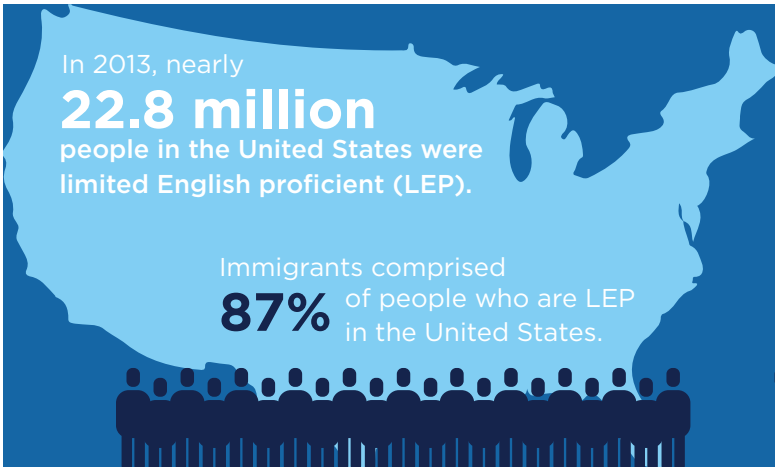
This paper provides an overview of some key issues and makes recommendations related to preparing adult immigrants, including those who are limited English proficient and are foreign-trained or have low educational attainment, to reach their full career potential. Many of these issues are equally pertinent to nonimmigrant workers, such as individuals who are low income, have low educational attainment or are adult learners.

Opportunities and Challenges

In 2015, the foreign-born population comprised 16.7 percent of the labor force and had a higher labor force participation rate than the native-born population.[8] Immigrants are important contributors to the workforce of many industries. Nationally, immigrants are more likely than the native-born population to be employed in the following sectors: administrative services, agriculture and extraction, construction, leisure and hospitality, manufacturing and other services (such as equipment and machinery repair, dry cleaning and laundry services, personal care services and temporary parking services).[9] Together, these industries account for 29 percent of our nation's gross domestic product and employ 37 percent of our workers.[10]

Like all Americans, immigrants want to advance in their careers. To do so, immigrants need support for building their English skills for career success, increasing credential and degree attainment and improving digital technology skills. Additionally, foreign-trained immigrants need opportunities to maximize their potential.

LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN THE UNITED STATES



BUILDING ENGLISH AND OTHER BASIC SKILLS THROUGH ADULT EDUCATION

Adult education programs improve the economic mobility of immigrants by building their English language skills, helping them achieve their high school diploma or the equivalent, and/or increasing their literacy and numeracy skills. About 23 percent of recent immigrants have not completed high school.[11] A recent analysis by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that immigrants comprise one-third of adults with low literacy skills and one-quarter of adults with low numeracy skills in the United States.[12]

Additionally, in 2013, nearly 22.8 million people in the United States were limited English proficient[13] (LEP) — individuals ages 5 and over who speak English less than "very well," as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Immigrants comprised 87 percent of people who are LEP in the United States.[14] About 47 percent of people ages 16 and over, almost 9.3 million, who were LEP were not enrolled in high school or did not have a high school diploma or equivalent.[15]

Adult education programs also have economic and social public benefits. For example, states' return on investment studies show that adult education programs can lead to increases in tax revenue, business productivity and consumer spending as well as decreased reliance on public assistance programs and government health care spending.[16] Public social benefits include the increased ability to adapt to and use technology, and appreciation of diversity.[17]

English language skills are closely associated with increased earnings.[18] Individuals who are LEP predominately work in low-paying jobs[19] and earn 25 to 40 percent less than their English-proficient peers.[20] Analyses show that English-proficient individuals who work full-time year-round have an earnings advantage across all levels of educational attainment.[21] For example, English-proficient individuals with a high school diploma or some college have 39 percent higher median earnings ($40,000) than their peers who are LEP ($28,700).[22]

Federal and state governments fund adult education programs. At the federal level, the Adult Education and Financial Literacy Act (AEFLA), which is Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), authorizes adult education programs. Between 2003 and 2013, federal funding for AEFLA declined by more than 20 percent, and state investment by nearly 8 percent (adjusted for inflation).[23] In the 2014 program year (July 1, 2014, to June 30, 2015), AEFLA served more than 1.5 million adults, of whom only about 671,000 were served through the English literacy program.[24]

Demand for adult education services is overwhelming, including for English language programs. For example, the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education reported in 2010 that 72 percent of local adult education providers across all states had a wait list, and time on the wait list doubled between 2008 and 2010.[25] Delays continue to be a problem: a U.S. Department of Education official noted in October 2016 that the department was aware that, across the country, people had to wait to enter adult education programs.[26]

Interest is growing among policymakers and practitioners to depart from the traditional model of providing sequential English and occupational skill development, under which an immigrant would need to reach certain levels of English proficiency before beginning industry or occupational skills training. Newer models include developing the employment skills of immigrants through contextualized English language programs that build vocabulary specific to an industry or employer, as well as integrated education and training programs, which can combine adult education and technical skills training so that participants, including immigrants, build both sets of skills concurrently.

For example, Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce, a project of the National Immigration Forum in partnership with the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education and Miami Dade College, provides customized, contextualized English language instruction for incumbent frontline retail workers. Training is provided at the worksite and at local community colleges and is delivered in person and virtually. The curriculum incorporates vocabulary and concepts relevant to the retail industry, such as customer service, store safety, technology and team communication. In the first year, project participants experienced increased English-language fluency, leading to improved confidence and better productivity, and some received promotions at the conclusion of the training.[27] (For more on this project, see the Forum's blogpost, "New Paper Addresses the Importance of Language Learning."[28])

Through these innovative models, immigrants are able to accelerate their English and technical skills development, saving time and money as they increase their competitiveness in the labor market. Employers also benefit from developing a more qualified workforce, which can have direct effects on their business operations. For example, employer partners in Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce reported improvement in store productivity as a result of participants' increased language skills and quality of work, reduced time per task, and higher employee retention at participating sites, thus reducing the turnover-associated cost of recruiting and training new workers.[29] Research about the manufacturing sector's approach to training its workers who are LEP

found employers supported programs that integrated English-language training with technical skill training because they "had a measurable positive impact on the bottom line."[30]

Recommendations

1. Increase federal and state investment in adult education programs to build English language and other basic skills of immigrants. Adult education programs build immigrants' critical English language and other basic skills. At minimum, Congress should fully fund the WIOA Title II adult education programs at the authorized level, and states should increase their investments in adult education programs.

2. Increase public, philanthropic and private-sector investment in innovative English language and technical skills training programs to accelerate skills development of immigrants who are LEP and prepare them to meet employers' needs. Federal and state governments, philanthropy and business leaders should expand integrated education and training models that concurrently build the English language, other basic and technical skills of immigrants who are LEP. Multisector partnerships, particularly ones that engage businesses and training providers such as community colleges, will enable immigrants participating in these programs to acquire the technical skills that employers need in today's workforce.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act presents a tremendous opportunity for workforce leaders to prepare immigrants to reach their career potential.

INCREASING IMMIGRANT ACCESS TO FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICES UNDER WIOA

Implementation of WIOA presents a tremendous opportunity for federal, state and local workforce development leaders to prepare immigrants who are LEP to reach their career potential and ensure that employers are able to tap into their skills. Signed into law in July 2014, WIOA replaced the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) and serves as the primary authorizing legislation for the core federal employment and training programs. WIOA establishes a national framework for the public workforce system and a network of American Job Centers to assist job seekers and employers so they can compete in the 21st-century economy.[31]

One of the purposes of WIOA is "to increase … access to and opportunities for … employment, education, training, and support services … need[ed] to succeed in the labor market."[32] Among those to be served are "individuals who are English language learners, individuals who have low levels of literacy, and individuals facing substantial cultural barriers"[33] — in other words, immigrants.

The Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker programs are the main federal employment and training programs for adults ages 18 and over who are low-income or who were laid off, fired or self-employed and who can no longer work because of economic conditions. Under WIOA, eligible individuals can access a range of career and training services including English language acquisition and integrated education and training programs.[34]

Historically, as analysis of data from program years 2000 to 2010 show, job seekers who are LEP, a proxy for immigrants, have been disproportionately underserved through WIA Title I Adult program even though they are overrepresented in the eligible population.[35] Under the WIA Title I Dislocated Worker program, services to job seekers who are LEP declined during this time period.[36] This trend remains: From April 2014 to March 2015, such job seekers comprised only 1.2 percent of participants who exited the WIA Title I Adult program[37] and only 1.5 percent of participants who exited the WIA Title I Dislocated Worker program[38] and received intensive or training services.

One significant opportunity to increase services to individuals with barriers to employment, including immigrants, is the establishment of a new priority of service for the Title I Adult program.[39] People who are "basic skills deficient" now have priority for individualized career and training services in addition to individuals who receive public assistance or meet other low-income thresholds.[40] The definition of basic skills deficient includes "[an] individual [who] is unable to compute or solve problems, or read, write, or speak English, at a level necessary to function on the job, in the individual's family, or in society."[41]

Local workforce boards should implement this new priority of service provision by proactively analyzing the skills needs of the local workforce, including people who are LEP, and developing and implementing programs to address those needs. Local workforce boards should also conduct explicit outreach to partners with experience serving these job seekers to identify potential participants and establish a targeted amount of funding dedicated to serving job seekers who meet this eligibility criteria.[42]

The Aspen Institute recently found that "connections and coordination" between immigrant-serving organizations and workforce organizations, including American Job Centers, is limited.[43] Thus, in order to realize the WIOA vision of increasing employment, education, training and supportive services to individuals with barriers to employment, including individuals who are LEP, federal, state and local workforce leaders need to reach out to partner organizations that serve this population and develop appropriate programs that meet their particular skills needs.

For example, state and local workforce boards should consider how to address the workforce needs of immigrants in developing their state, regional and local talent pipelines when developing their mandatory strategic plans. These plans outline the state and local workforce boards' vision and implementation strategies for the public workforce system at the state, regional and local levels. The California State Workforce Board, for instance, has woven requirements for addressing the needs of the state's foreign-born population and LEP individuals throughout its regional and local plan guidance. This includes requiring that consultations for the development of regional plans include community-based organizations that serve individuals who are English language learners,

and that regional and local plans include an assessment of the needs of these job seekers as well as a description of targeted services to meet those needs.[44]

State and local workforce boards also should partner closely with adult education providers to ensure integration of services so that participants in Title II adult education programs can access Title I employment and training services seamlessly. Additionally, federal and state workforce leaders should lift up partnerships between the public workforce system, community- and faith-based organizations, and other partners that have expertise serving immigrants and that are building the capacity of local workforce boards to meet the workforce needs of immigrants in their local community.

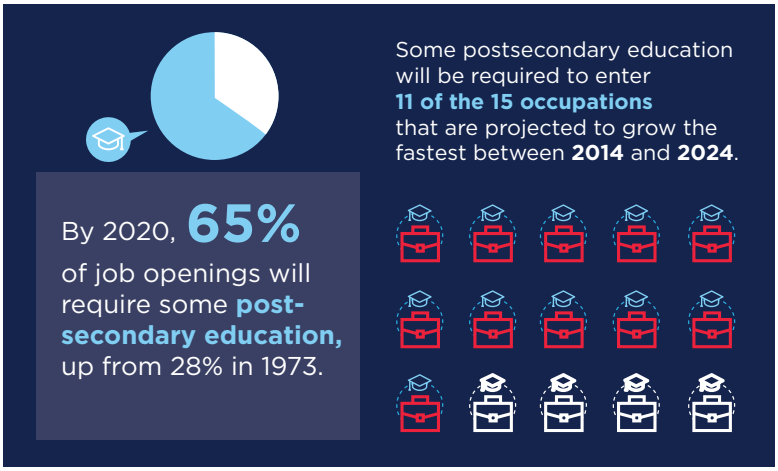
Recommendations

1. **Increase federal investment in WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker programs to meet the needs of job seekers, including immigrants and those who are LEP.** More people are expected to need WIOA employment and training services, including more resource-intensive services, due to the new statutory and regulatory requirements on serving individuals with barriers to employment, including LEP individuals. At minimum, Congress should fully fund the WIOA Title I adult and dislocated worker programs at the authorized levels to ensure that immigrants, including those who are LEP, and businesses are able to compete in the global economy.

2. **Increase the number of immigrants, including those who are LEP, served by the WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker programs.** The U.S. Departments of Education and Labor jointly should issue guidance and provide technical assistance to state and local workforce boards, adult education providers, and other stakeholders regarding opportunities and requirements under WIOA to improve services to immigrants and LEP individuals through WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker programs. The guidance should address the need to increase integration between the Title I employment and training programs and the Title II adult education programs. The guidance should also establish a vision for and encourage local workforce boards to meaningfully implement the new priority of service provision for the WIOA Title I Adult program. Through technical assistance, the departments should build the capacity of the public workforce system to more effectively serve immigrants and individuals who are LEP and lift up examples where states and local areas are proactively assessing and addressing the needs of these individuals.

3. **Expand local partnerships between the public workforce system, community- and faith-based organizations experienced in serving immigrants, and employers to build the workforce skills of immigrants to meet local and regional employers' needs.** To support the development of these partnerships, federal and state workforce development leaders and philanthropic entities should invest in multipronged capacity-building efforts aimed at building the workforce skills of immigrants. The effort should include: informing the public workforce system of the challenges and opportunities to build the skills of immigrant job seekers; educating immigrant-serving organizations of governing policies and services available through the public workforce system; and evaluating and disseminating best workforce policies and practices that could be replicated across communities. The capacity-building efforts should also develop intermediary organizations that can work in partnership with the public workforce system; small, local community- and faith-based organizations serving immigrants; and employers by brokering and deepening relationships, identifying promising strategies to strengthen workforce services to immigrants given the demographic trends and employer needs of

MAJORITY OF FUTURE JOB OPENINGS WILL REQUIRE SOME POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION



the local area or region, and identifying opportunities to scale proven strategies across the local area and region. Furthermore, these efforts should target state and local workforce system leaders; locally elected officials; employers, industry associations, and Chambers of Commerce; training providers such as community colleges; and community- and faith-based organizations.

ADDITIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR ADULT LEARNERS LEAD TO A BETTER-PREPARED IMMIGRANT WORKFORCE

Working adults see the value of obtaining additional education and training to further their careers. In 2016, 54 percent of adults in the labor force reported that training and developing new skills would be essential "throughout their work life in order to keep up with changes in the workforce," and 45 percent of employed adults reported that, in the previous 12 months, they had received extra training to improve their job skills.[45]

In addition, by 2020, 65 percent of job openings will require some postsecondary education, an increase of 28 percent from 1973.[46] Some postsecondary education will be required to enter 11 of the 15 occupations that are projected to grow the fastest between 2014 and 2024.[47]

The demographics of students enrolled in higher education is shifting as more adult learners are enrolling in postsecondary institutions (two- and four-year public, private nonprofit and private for-profit colleges and universities). The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) analysis of data from the 2011-2012 school year shows that 74 percent of undergraduate students are "nontraditional."[48] A nontraditional student is one who meets one or more of the following characteristics: is financially independent, has one or more dependents, is a single parent, does not have a traditional high school diploma, has delayed enrollment in college or university, attends school part time, and/or is employed full time.[49]

Adult learners — those age 25 and over[50] — are considered to be nontraditional students.[51] The number of adult learners enrolled in postsecondary institutions increased by 19 percent, or nearly 1.3 million,[52] between 2003 and 2013. NCES projects that enrollment of adult learners will increase by 14 percent or approximately 1.1 million,[53] between 2013 and 2024. Adult learners make up the majority of part-time students enrolled in undergraduate studies at two- and four-year private nonprofit and private for-profit postsecondary institutions.[54]

Many immigrant college students are nontraditional students who have delayed starting postsecondary education, are studying part-time, and/or have dependents.[55] Adult immigrants are motivated to enroll in postsecondary education to increase their competitiveness by building their occupational skills[56] and obtaining a certificate or degree in the United States. Immigrants who received some or all of their education in the United States were found to attain earnings, skills and professional success at higher rates than immigrants who completed their education abroad.[57]

In 2007-2008, about 10 percent of all undergraduates were immigrants or foreign-born,[58] and a larger percentage of immigrant undergraduates were age 24 and older compared with all undergraduates.[59] Asian and Hispanic students constituted the majority of immigrant students enrolled in undergraduate studies.[60] Asian (40 percent) and Hispanic (36 percent) immigrant undergraduate students had lower rates of full-time enrollment compared with all undergraduates (47 percent).[61]

Research shows that adult learners consistently face barriers to furthering their education that include a lack of time to pursue education, inconvenient course scheduling and location, and cost.[62] Immigrants face these and other barriers, such as limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with postsecondary school systems in the United States, and lack of financial aid.[63]

Institutions of higher education are responding to the needs of adult learners in several ways. These include offering shorter-term vocational and workforce training programs, scheduling classes on the weekends or during summer sessions, increasing online instruction, integrating job-related content into the curriculum, and offering interim credentials linked to professional advancement.[64]

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Other promising models employ prior learning assessments (PLA), competency-based education (CBE) programs, and work-based learning programs. PLAs offer students an opportunity to receive academic credit for knowledge gained outside of the classroom through employment, professional training, volunteer activities or military training. In a study of nearly 63,500 students across 48 postsecondary institutions, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning found that students who had undergone a PLA had a much higher and faster degree-earning rate and were more likely to accumulate credit toward a degree than those who had not.[65] Through CBE programs, students receive credit when they demonstrate mastery of the course content or skill, instead of based on the amount of time they spend in a classroom (credit hours).[66] The PLA and CBE models can accelerate the credential or degree attainment of adult learners, including immigrants who are foreign-trained and/or LEP, saving them time and money while more quickly preparing a skilled workforce to meet the needs of employers.

Through work-based learning programs, the OECD reports, "Learning … takes place through some combination of observing, undertaking, and reflecting on productive work in real workplaces. It may be paid or unpaid."[67] These models include registered apprenticeship, on-the-job training and internships. In addition to possibly earning a paycheck while learning, work-based learning models

can provide immigrants with opportunities to gain valuable exposure to and experience working with a specific industry in the United States.

In particular, community colleges are uniquely situated to prepare adult learners, including immigrants, to be competitive in the workforce. For example, many community colleges offer adult education programs, including English as a second language (ESL) programs; career and technical education programs to build industry-specific or occupational skills; access to career pathways programs; and academic degree programs. Some community colleges have implemented programs and policies to help ensure that their immigrant students are successful, such as analyzing immigrant-specific trends in the community and tailoring programs to meet identified needs; reaching out to local organizations that serve immigrants to inform them about programs and resources available at the community college; using more comprehensive and culturally sensitive student assessments; and increasing the alignment of noncredit and for-credit coursework.[68] Also, recent research shows that organizations serving immigrants find that partnering with community colleges can help immigrants increase their competitiveness in the labor force through enhanced educational and training opportunities.[69]

Community colleges are uniquely situated to prepare adult learners, including immigrants, to be competitive in the workforce.

Federal financial aid policies currently support traditional education models and need to be updated to meet the needs of adult learners, including immigrants, so that these students can fulfill their educational goals and better contribute to the workforce. A higher percentage of immigrant students (35 percent of Asians and 36 percent of Hispanics) in a 2012 study were low income compared with all undergraduates (25 percent).[70]

Ensuring Pell grant access for adult learners through "year-round Pell" enables eligible students to receive aid for year-round study and can accelerate degree completion.[71] Preserving Pell eligibility for half-time and less-than-half-time students allows these individuals to pursue their educational goals while juggling work and other responsibilities.[72]

Additionally, access to Pell grants should be expanded to students with bachelor's degrees or who are participating in vocational or career programs, certain short-term training programs, prior learning assessments and competency-based education programs.[73] Last, it is important that students have access to sufficient Pell grant assistance, and the maximum Pell grant award should be tied to the consumer price index.[74] Data show that in the past decade, between 1.4 million and 2.4 million students were not able to accomplish their undergraduate educational goals because of insufficient Pell grant assistance.[75]

Recommendations

1. Promote education and workforce development programmatic strategies, such as flexible schedules and use of technology, that meet the needs of busy adult learners, including immigrants. To support educational success and prepare a skilled workforce, higher education and workforce development leaders should continue to incorporate strategies that address the barriers adult learners, including immigrants, face. These strategies include offering classes on the weekend and during the

summer sessions, online education programs and blended learning approaches, and enhanced child care support for enrolled students. In addition, local community- and faith-based organizations may serve as access points for immigrants. Higher education and workforce development leaders should partner with these organizations to share information about credential and degree programs, available federal and other financial aid programs, and supportive services to extend their reach to immigrants.

2. **Expand education and training models that enable adult learners, including immigrants who are foreign-trained and/or LEP, to demonstrate their skills and expertise gained abroad and accelerate their credential or degree completion.** Higher education leaders should utilize PLAs, CBE models and other strategies that enable adult learners, including immigrants, to accelerate their credential or degree completion. Special attention should go toward ensuring that immigrants who are LEP can fully articulate their education, skills and experience through PLAs, which traditionally have been designed for English-proficient students. Overall, these strategies may save adult learners time and money while more efficiently preparing a talent pipeline that meets the needs of employers.

3. **Expand public-private partnerships that incorporate work-based learning models that take into account the needs of immigrants, such as building English skills.** Federal, state and local workforce development and education leaders as well as businesses should expand work-based learning models such as Registered Apprenticeship, on-the-job training and paid internships to include immigrants. Program designs should maximize the participation of immigrants who are LEP, such as by incorporating contextualized ESL that is industry or employer specific, integrated education and training models that includes building English language skills and/or CBE approaches.

4. **Increase capacity of community colleges, in partnership with community- and faith-based organizations, to meet the skills and workforce development needs of immigrants.** Federal, state and philanthropic leaders should increase investments for community colleges to implement proven school policies and programs that support immigrants' successful credential and degree attainment. In addition, federal, state and philanthropic leaders' focus should expand partnerships between community colleges and organizations serving immigrants by piloting new and replicating promising models and providing dedicated technical assistance.

5. **Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act should address the needs of adult learners, including immigrants.** The Higher Education Act governs federal financial aid policies. Reauthorization of this act should include provisions that maximize the opportunities for adult learners, including immigrants, to receive federal financial aid to pursue their educational goals and compete in the labor force.

BUILDING DIGITAL SKILLS

Digital technologies are central to how employers recruit and hire and how workers learn, find jobs and work. The Pew Research Center reported in 2015 that of those who had looked for work in the previous two years, 90 percent used the internet in their job search and 84 percent had applied for a job online.[76] People who have lower educational attainment are likely to use their smartphone to fill out a job application or create a resume or cover letter.[77] Additionally, nearly two-thirds of people in the United States use social media tools, of whom 35 percent have used social media to look for jobs.[78]

Technology is also changing the way we learn and develop our skills. For example, in the fall of 2012, more than 5.4 million students in two- and four-year postsecondary institutions were enrolled partially or exclusively in distance education courses.[79] A survey from the American Association of Community Colleges found that between fall 2013 and fall 2014, enrollment in distance learning programs grew 4.7 percent and accounted for nearly all student growth at two-year institutions.[80] The dean of WebCollege at Truckee Meadows Community College in Nevada and chair of the Coalition of Affiliated Councils noted, "The flexibility of online classes, the growth of hybrid models and the ability to use smartphones and apps to conduct classwork have made distance learning more appealing to students."[81]

Building the digital skills of immigrants is critical so they can leverage these tools for success in their job searches, education and workforce training programs, and on-the-job performance.

The use of technology is not limited to postsecondary education but also is incorporated into adult education, including ESL programs. As a 2008 National Institute for Literacy report indicated, "Many practitioners and researchers see technology-enhanced teaching and learning, including distance education, as the future of adult basic, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and continuing education ..."[82] Technology presents an opportunity to exponentially expand the reach of adult education programs, including ESL programs,[83] absent a significant increase in funding to meet the great need for these services.

As the author of a 2011 article in the Journal of Adult Education noted, "Adult ESOL students want and need technology skills to compete for jobs."[84] Research shows that using technology in adult education programs, including English language classes, helps students of all levels increase "self-confidence, motivation-retention-persistence, independence, goal directedness, real-world transfer, and reinforcement of skill acquisition...[as well as] meet the secondary goal of learners to become more computer literate."[85]

It is important to ensure that immigrants, including immigrants who are LEP, are able to participate fully in job searches and education and workforce training programs that rely on digital technology. The ability to "problem-[solve] in a technology-rich environment" refers to adults' abilities to use digital technology, communication tools, and networks to acquire and evaluate information,

communicate with others, and perform practical tasks."[86] OECD data show that 76 percent of immigrants "struggle with using digital technology and other communications tools to access, use, and communicate information online." These immigrants' digital skills are such that they "are unlikely to be able to organize their emails into folders."[87] The low digital skills of these immigrants may be related to their low literacy and numeracy skills. As the National Institute for Literacy report found, "The use of computer equipment and online technologies increases as adults' literacy and language skills increase."[88]

Building the digital skills of immigrants is critical so they can leverage these tools for success in their job searches, education and workforce training programs, and on-the-job performance. Partnerships with libraries and community-based organizations can help accomplish these goals. The Institute of Museum and Library Services notes that 55 percent of immigrants access their public library at least once a week.[89] Research shows that immigrants and English language learners regularly use technology services available at the library to access government services, conduct research about pertinent laws, access email, communicate with family living abroad and read newspapers and other online sites in their native languages.[90] Libraries are also providing digital literacy classes to immigrants. For example, libraries in Idaho and Minnesota offered programs that included an introduction to the computer and internet and lessons on how to apply for jobs, find education and health information, and access government services.[91]

Some states are exploring innovations in using digital technology in ESL programs. For example, in October 2016, Michigan's Office of New Americans announced an Adult ESL for New Americans initiative and issued a request for proposals. The goals of the initiative include innovative delivery of ESL through "creative learning platforms" and "self-paced learning."[92] In addition, policymakers and program operators should consider leveraging smartphone applications and social media tools in content delivery. These digital tools are accessible to immigrants who are LEP and have a smartphone but may not have ready access to other computer hardware. In 2008, 75 percent of employed immigrants who spoke English "not at all" had access to a cell phone in their home, a percentage that was projected to increase.[93] A 2012 survey of immigrants, including those who are LEP, in the Philadelphia area found that 68 percent owned a smartphone and 66 percent accessed the internet through their phones.[94] And the Pew Research Center found that in 2015, 64 percent of people in the United States owned a smartphone, and 30 percent of smartphone owners use their phones to access educational content or take a class.[95]

Recommendations

1. **Expand partnerships with libraries and community-based organizations to build the digital skills of immigrants.** Federal, state and local government leaders and philanthropic entities should expand programs focused on building the digital capacity of immigrants, including those who are LEP. Libraries, community- and faith-based organizations, and other community partners have experience introducing immigrants to the computer and internet, as well as to digital tools to conduct job searches and access information such as government services.

2. **Expand innovative education and workforce training models that build digital skills in addition to English language and occupational skills.** Education and workforce development leaders at all levels should partner with philanthropic entities and businesses, especially those specializing in internet and information technologies, to pilot models that build immigrants' digital skills: familiarity with learning management systems, use of social media and other platforms to support interactivity in online learning, the ability to use digital tools for simulations and other education and workforce training strategies, and the ability to use industry- or employer-required software or digital tools.

FULLY TAPPING THE TALENTS OF FOREIGN-TRAINED IMMIGRANTS

Today's immigrants are more educated than previous generations of newcomers: 41 percent of recent immigrants have at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 20 percent of newly arrived immigrants in 1970.[96] Of the 7 million college-educated immigrants in the United States, about 55 percent obtained their degree abroad.[97] Foreign-trained immigrants have a wealth of skills, expertise, work experience and credentials that they can apply to meet the workforce needs of employers in the United States. However, about 24 percent, or 1.7 million, foreign-trained immigrants are affected by "brain waste": They are unemployed or underemployed and working in jobs below their skill level.[98] Generally, adults who are LEP have lower educational attainment than their English-proficient peers. However, notably, 59 percent of adults age 19 to 24 who are LEP are high school graduates, and 52 percent of adults age 25 or older have obtained a high school degree/equivalent or higher.[99]

These immigrants face a range of challenges in finding employment that aligns with their training and experience. For example, foreign-

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trained immigrants may be unfamiliar with the job search process in the United States, including the growing need to tap into one's social networks. Social networks can help job seekers reach hiring managers because of the trust based on a common connection.[100] Foreign-trained immigrants may have weak social and professional networks in the United States. Having a strong social network can affect the economic mobility of foreign-trained immigrants. A study analyzing the earnings, skills and professional success of 4,000 immigrant professionals found that immigrants with strong social networks achieved success in all of these areas when compared with their peers with weak networks.[101]

Educational institutions and employers often require the verification of credentials or degrees, including foreign credentials. By nature, this is a rigorous process designed to establish the authenticity of a credential or degree. It can involve having the degree-granting institution transmit official documents, such as a transcript, bearing the appropriate signatures and seal of the institution.[102] Foreign-trained immigrants whose foreign credentials were fully or partially recognized achieved more earnings, skills and professional success than those immigrants whose foreign credentials were not recognized.[103]

While many foreign degree-granting institutions may be able to participate in this verification process, institutions located in war or conflict zones or experiencing other detrimental sociopolitical situations may have difficulty responding. Immigrants from these countries may be left in limbo, unable to have their credentials verified. As such, educational institutions and employers should be flexible, as appropriate, in waiving the requirement for degree-granting institutions to provide original documentation so that immigrants from countries that are experiencing sociopolitical unrest can undergo the recertification process.

Furthermore, similar to other workers, foreign-trained immigrants are affected by complex policies and regulations governing professional licensure, which differ from state to state. More than 25 percent of workers in the United States need a license to perform their job, compared with less than five percent in the 1950s.[104] Congress has urged states to evaluate and ease licensure policies and regulations as appropriate. In September 2016, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 5587, the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, by an overwhelming

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bipartisan vote. The bill includes a provision encouraging states to conduct occupational licensure reform to ensure that requirements are not creating barriers for the workforce, nor hindering entrepreneurship and innovation.[105]

The Obama administration, in its July 2015 report "Occupational Licensing: A Framework for Policymakers," strongly recommended that states ease unnecessary burdens of licensure requirements by 1) only having requirements that protect public health and safety, 2) reducing overly restrictive licenses identified through cost-benefit assessments, 3) increasing the portability of licenses across states to support the mobility of skilled workers, and 4) allowing practitioners to "offer services to the full extent of their current competency."[106] The report acknowledged that licensing regulations present barriers for skilled immigrants and native-born workers with foreign credentials to work in fields in which they have training and experience.[107]

Variations of licensure requirements across states make it difficult to map out complete career pathways for the primary occupations in which foreign-trained immigrants are qualified. They also add additional educational requirements and expenses that may prevent these immigrants from entering their professional fields. Several states have addressed these and other barriers to integrating foreign-trained immigrants into their workforces. For example, in 2015, Minnesota established the International Graduate Medical Assistance Program, the nation's first comprehensive program to assist immigrants with foreign medical degrees to become doctors in the United States.

Minnesota recognized that its immigrant and minority communities could help address the state's projected shortage of primary care providers and its need to increase linguistic and cultural competencies in its health care workforce.[108] The program offers immigrant medical graduates career and licensing guidance, builds English skills related to health care, and increases digital skills related to computers and electronic health records. In particular, residency requirements can be a major hurdle that precludes foreign-trained immigrants from becoming physicians in the United States. The state worked with residency programs at the University of Minnesota to waive these requirements when a foreign-trained immigrant passes a clinical assessment. The state will assess and certify the clinical readiness of participants to participate in a medical residency program.[109]

Maximizing the labor force contributions of foreign-trained immigrants not only improves their economic mobility, but also has positive ripple effects for the economy. Upwardly Global analyzed data about 500 foreign-trained immigrants and refugees who moved from unemployment or underemployment to jobs more closely aligned with their training and experience. They found

that these individuals had an average annual salary increase of 900 percent (about $3,500, to about $35,000) within one to two years and contributed to the creation of nearly 700 additional jobs, increased federal income tax revenue by nearly $1.8 million annually, and increased consumer spending by $16 million to $17 million annually.[110]

Recommendations

1. **Expand public-private programs that engage employers, community-based organizations and other partners to help foreign-trained immigrants enter fields for which they have education and experience.** Such programs should provide mentoring and job search assistance, expand social and professional networks to foreign-trained immigrants, and build foreign-trained immigrants' English language proficiency in preparation for licensure examinations.

2. **Increase flexibility, as appropriate, in the recognition process of foreign credentials.** Education leaders and employers are urged to balance the need for a rigorous verification process with the reality that for some immigrants, the sociopolitical situation (war, social unrest, etc.) in their home countries may make it difficult for them to obtain official documents from their degree-granting institutions.

3. **Break down licensing barriers for foreign-trained immigrants.** Professional licensure policies and regulations must balance the need to protect public health and safety with meeting the needs of our communities and businesses through the skills of available workers,[111] including foreign-trained immigrants. State licensure entities, industry associations, employers, workforce leaders, education leaders and immigrant-serving community-based organizations should collaborate to identify opportunities to map out career pathways for licensed occupations and identify and replicate promising policies and practices that ease entry into licensed professions for foreign-trained immigrants.

Conclusion

The United States has an economic imperative to develop talent pipelines that meet the skills needs of employers. By 2020, less than four years from now, the United States is expected to be short an estimated 7.5 million private-sector workers across all skill levels.[112] At the same time, immigrants will remain a vital segment of the U.S. workforce: Immigrants and their children will comprise all of the labor force growth in the next 40 years.[113] Building the skills of immigrants is thus essential for maintaining U.S. economic growth over the coming decades.

To do so will require bold leadership from education and workforce development policymakers at the federal, state and local levels; philanthropic leaders; employers; community- and faith-based organizations; and other stakeholders. Investments are necessary in the following areas: 1) building English and other basic skills of immigrants through increased support for adult education programs; 2) preparing immigrants for local and regional economic success through increasing their participation in federal employment and training programs under WIOA; 3) supporting adult immigrants' abilities to attain credentials and degrees; 4) increasing immigrants' digital skills; and 5) fully tapping into the talents of foreign-trained immigrants.

Leaders also must address the lack of data regarding immigrants' participation in and outcomes from education and workforce development programs. Federal, state and local leaders need to collect more robust data about how immigrants are accessing and participating in these programs, as well as analyze their performance outcomes. The data should be made accessible to stakeholders such as evaluators, policy advocates and program operators. Such data can help inform the development of policies, strategies and investments by governments and philanthropic endeavors at all levels. Also, such data can help program managers assess and continuously improve services.

The recommendations outlined in this paper will help to improve education and workforce programs overall, which will benefit all American job seekers and workers and will ensure that businesses have an expanded talent pipeline to compete in the global economy.

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