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# Supporting Refugees and Asylum Seekers on Their College Journeys

Lindsey N. Kingston\* and Esma Karakas\*\*

## Abstract

*Armed conflict and political repression have created a refugee crisis in higher education, interrupting many students' university educations or blocking young people from beginning their studies in the first place. This article outlines preliminary research findings from an ongoing project centered on improving displaced students' access to American higher education. Motivation for this research stems from the values inherent to human rights education (HRE). Preliminary research data drawn from qualitative interviews with ten forcibly displaced students (or former students) living in Saint Louis, Missouri, highlight how refugees and asylum seekers face unique challenges in accessing higher education. In particular, this study offers seven*

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*initial findings to consider: (1) Displaced students often struggle to understand the complicated American higher education system, including navigating admissions and financial aid. (2) They primarily rely on their personal social networks to garner information about higher education, which leads to both positive and negative consequences. (3) Cultural differences sometimes challenge displaced students' attempts to integrate into their new communities. (4) Family relationships and cultural dynamics at home can also impact their educational plans. (5) Faculty sometimes fail to understand the challenges facing displaced students, particularly in relation to language barriers. (6) Yet, faculty members and other support staff are often key for encouraging these students to continue their studies. (7) Administrators tend to confuse international students in general with displaced students, leading to various bureaucratic obstacles. While this preliminary data illustrates the need for further study, it also offers starting points for supporting displaced students on their college journeys. Financial aid opportunities for asylum seekers, training for faculty and university staff, and building awareness and solidarity on campus are all essential components for making higher education more welcoming and accessible for this vulnerable student population.*

**Keywords:** Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Higher Education, Right to Education

## **Introduction**

**A**rmed conflict and political repression have created a refugee crisis in higher education, interrupting many students' university educations or blocking young people from beginning their studies in the first place. Worldwide, only one percent of forcibly displaced persons<sup>1</sup> attend university compared to a 37 percent global average (United Nations

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<sup>1</sup> Forced displacement (also referred to as "forced migration") covers a wide range of phenomena, including involuntary movement (both across international borders and

High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018, p. 25). Intellectual communities have been decimated by war and persecution in conflict states, while access to higher education in countries of refuge and resettlement is often obstructed by a range of barriers. One study shows that 23 percent of refugee men and 27 percent of refugee women over the age of 25 have not completed high school upon their arrival in the United States (Dryden-Peterson, 2016, p. 134). “The problem is snowballing,” explains James King, a senior research and communications manager at the Institute of International Education’s (IIE) Scholar Rescue Fund. “You now have 25-year-olds who would have gone to university when they were 22 but have never been able to access it” (quoted in Redden, 2015). Yet despite these delays, displaced young people are often determined to pursue higher education. Research data highlights how they are “hungry for higher education, not just for the acquisition of newly acquired skills, but also for the expanded perspective offered through the experience” (Crea, 2016, p. 21). Displaced young people also show strong aspirations for overcoming pre-migration experiences to attain educational goals – even in the face of multiple systemic barriers (Shakya et al., 2010).

This article outlines preliminary research findings from an ongoing project focused on improving displaced students’ access to American higher education. Motivation for this research stems from the values inherent to human rights education (HRE)<sup>2</sup>— including fostering empathy and

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inside a single country) due to environmental disasters, conflict, famine, large-scale development projects, and other issues. Displaced persons include asylum-seekers, refugees, and the internally displaced (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016; see also International Organization for Migration, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training defines human rights education as comprising “all educational, training, information, awareness-raising and learning activities aimed at promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and thus contributing to, inter alia, the prevention of human rights violations and abuses by providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviors, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights” (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011).

solidarity with those whose rights are threatened, promoting a sense of human dignity regardless of differences, and respecting norms of social justice (The Advocates for Human Rights, n.d.; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011). Studying the needs of this vulnerable population is vitally important because “asylum-seeking and refugee young people place education as a central aspiration” and education is linked to greater integration and healing (Gateley, 2015, p. 29, 36). Indeed, “educational experiences in post-migration contexts have critical impacts on the resettlement process and overall well-being for refugee immigrants” and existing studies show that many refugee students express aspirations for pursuing higher education specifically (Shakya et al., 2010, p. 67, 69). At the same time, this study addresses an important research gap: “While there is a growing body of research on the integration of immigrants, policy-relevant research on refugee children and youth from an educational perspective is rather limited, fragmented and case specific” (Cerna, 2019, p. 4).<sup>3</sup> Our ultimate project goals include seeking solutions and identifying best practices for addressing these challenges, as well as creating resources to assist university educators in supporting their displaced students.

Preliminary research data drawn from qualitative interviews with ten forcibly displaced students (or former students) living in Saint Louis, Missouri, highlight how refugees and asylum seekers face unique challenges in accessing higher education. In particular, this study offers seven initial findings to consider: (1) Interviewees often struggled to understand the

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<sup>3</sup> Notably, most existing scholarship focuses on the education of refugee *children*, rather than addressing the needs of college-aged displaced students. A review of the literature shows that “schools play a critical role in helping refugee children find some sense of safety and helping maximize their learning potential” (Thomas, 2016, p. 194), for instance, although refugee children face challenges such as language barriers, teacher-centered pedagogy, and discrimination in school settings (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Indeed, refugee children face a cumulative risk for educational disadvantage (Graham et al., 2016) that certainly impacts their pursuit of higher education. While this research is important and relevant, more attention to displaced students in higher education is sorely needed – particularly since many young people are experiencing forced displacement for the first time while in high school or in the midst of their college studies back home.

complicated American higher education system, including navigating admissions and financial aid. (2) They primarily relied on their personal social networks to garner information about higher education, which led to both positive and negative consequences. (3) Cultural differences sometimes challenged respondents' attempts to integrate into their new communities. (4) Family relationships and cultural dynamics at home could also impact their educational plans. (5) Faculty sometimes failed to understand the challenges facing interviewees, particularly in relation to language barriers. (6) Yet, faculty members and other support staff were often key for encouraging these students to continue their studies. (7) Administrators tended to confuse international students in general with our displaced respondents, leading to various bureaucratic obstacles. While this preliminary data illustrates the need for further study, it also offers starting points for supporting displaced students on their college journeys. Initial interviews point toward the need for financial aid opportunities for asylum seekers, training for faculty and university staff, and building awareness and solidarity on campus as essential components for making higher education more welcoming and accessible for this vulnerable student population.

### **Displaced Students – Background**

In countries of resettlement and asylum, universities struggle to meet the growing demand for higher education among displaced youth – particularly since education is a vital component for meaningful integration into new societies, as noted above. Participation in higher education is an essential component for social inclusion, which “is centrally concerned with ensuring people are able to participate fully in the societies in which they live, and in so doing that their unique identities are represented and respected” (Whiteford, 2017, p. 59). Lindsey N. Kingston (2019), one of the authors of this article, argues that education is an essential right that provides people with a sense of purpose. “Rights to ‘purpose’ revolve around the basic rights and protections necessary to put a life of dignity within reach” – they are “the things that define us as individuals and bring us joy and fulfillment” (p. 5). Yet one of the most striking examples of threatened

rights to purpose stems from obstacles to education. That is true throughout the displacement process – when students are initially forced from their homes, when they have limited educational opportunities in camps, and when they face serious challenges to grade school and higher education after resettlement (Kingston, 2019, p. 94-96).

A limited number of scholarship programs support higher education for displaced students. For example, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) offers refugee students the possibility of pursuing an undergraduate education in their country of asylum. With funding from the German government and private donors, it has supported more than 12,000 students since 1992 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2015) advocates for a “do no harm” approach to ensure that refugee access to higher education is inclusive, non-discriminatory, and rights-protective. The organization notes that scholarships should cover the full course of study, as well as living costs for students and perhaps close family members, since “intensive, long-term support” is often necessary for displaced students to benefit meaningfully from higher education (p. 3). However, it is notable that those with pending asylum claims are frequently ineligible for such scholarships. In the United States, asylum-seeking students may be granted permission to work legally but still cannot access federal financial aid (including loans) before their asylum claim is approved and they are granted refugee status (Federal Student Aid., n.d.) – a process that could take years. While some universities and organizations offer scholarships for non-citizens, these programs are open to all international students – not just displaced people – and competition for this limited funding is stiff (for instance, see Ing & Bhardwa, 2018).

Despite existing scholarship initiatives, there is an enormous gap between opportunity and demand – and tuition assistance may not be enough. Displaced students often lack certifications, such as school records or exam results, or those qualifications are not recognized as equivalent to the local system in their new countries. The UNHCR (2018) warns that “not recognizing refugees’ unique situations and barring them from the next level of their education because of bureaucracy is callous and

counterproductive” (p. 25). Resettled students often have pre-resettlement educational experiences in low-income countries that stymie future scholarship; language barriers, teacher-centered pedagogy, and discrimination often thwart earlier attempts to receive an education (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Students in the University of East London’s OLIve course, a college prep program, recently echoed these concerns. They outlined a list of their challenges to higher education: Uncertain immigration status, finances, inability to recognize previous qualifications, language requirements, trauma, disconnect with academic skills and culture, lack of support and information, exclusion, and ever-changing immigration and educational policies (OLIve course students, IT trainer and director, 2019). In response to many of these concerns, universities are urged to “cut red tape relating to the admissions process, open study places for refugee students, and provide counseling and other services to traumatized students and their families” (De Wit & Altbach, 2016, p. 10).

Existing research suggests that universities are often unfamiliar with the challenges facing displaced students and lack “best practices” for supporting these student communities. Bureaucratic infrastructures are ill equipped to assist these students, both in terms of knowledge gaps and the inability to bridge cross-cultural divides. In the United Kingdom, for instance, refugees are often counted alongside other types of migrants; educational institutions do not acknowledge the specificity and multiplicity of issues faced by displaced persons, thus inhibiting opportunities and compounding their precarious position within British society (Gately, 2015). Research from Australia suggests that students from refugee backgrounds don’t view “cold” (unfamiliar/formal) institutional support as being focused on their particular needs, but rather prefer “warm” (familiar/formal) support from trusted sociocultural brokers or “hot” (familiar/informal) support within their own communities or student cohorts (Baker et al., 2018). The situation appears much the same in the United States, where data on the experiences of refugee students is far more limited. Indeed,

research on and support for displaced students in the U.S. has fallen significantly since former President Donald Trump drastically cut refugee resettlement in 2017<sup>4</sup> (see: Migration Policy Institute, 2017). Studies among potential U.S. college students—that is, refugee students in American high schools—provide starting points for conceptualizing their educational challenges, however. Scholars have recently highlighted how African-born Muslim refugee youth navigate social, religious, and linguistic marginalization in U.S. high school classrooms (Park, 2017), for instance, and investigated how Burmese refugee students adjust to public high school in the U.S. Midwest (Tandon, 2016). Those studies highlight a variety of cultural and bureaucratic obstacles for displaced students in the American educational system.

### **Research Project and Methods**

Situated in one of the United States' hubs of refugee resettlement, researchers at Webster University have the opportunity to engage in vital discussions aimed at alleviating this refugee crisis in higher education. Saint Louis has welcomed thousands of resettled refugees and asylum-seekers, including displaced Bosnians in the 1990s and more recent arrivals from throughout the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa (International Institute, n.d.; Singer & Wilson, 2006). Indeed, the city hosts a number of organizations dedicated to providing services and advocacy for displaced

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<sup>4</sup> While the future of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program remains uncertain, refugees and asylum-seekers already within the country often remain focused on attaining higher education. Blake Hamilton, a refugee resettlement specialist at the International Institute in Saint Louis, noted in 2016 – before Trump's executive order – that approximately 30 percent of the area's 1,200 new arrivals have some form of higher education. Almost all wanted to continue their education, usually at four-year universities rather than community colleges, once they have established themselves in the U.S. (personal communication, November 14, 2016).

people.<sup>5</sup> The existing literature highlights the complex relationship between displaced “newcomers” and the American citizenry – including within centers of resettlement such as Saint Louis, where resettled refugee populations often benefit struggling urban centers (Besteman, 2016; Çağlar & Schiller, 2018). However, few agencies tasked with assisting resettled refugees and asylum seekers have the infrastructure (or funding) to track clients after initial services are provided; once individuals and families are relatively “settled” in their new communities, or have migrated onward to different locations within the United States, their relationship with those agencies often ends abruptly. As a result, data about long-term successes and challenges remains limited – a research gap that this study begins to address.

Interviews centered on exploring the displaced students’ experiences with American higher education, paying particular attention to the obstacles they faced in pursuing their studies. Participants were college students (over the age of 18) who were also refugees or asylum seekers living in Saint Louis.<sup>6</sup> Data was collected using semi-structured qualitative

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<sup>5</sup> For instance: The International Institute (n.d.) collaborates with the U.S. State Department to assist resettled refugees in their transition to American life. The organization offers essential economic and cultural integration services, including English classes, employment, orientation, and citizenship preparation. Grassroots organizations such as Welcome Neighbor STL and their partner St. Louis Teens Aid Refugees Today (START) offer emotional and social support to the city’s refugee and immigrant community, mostly by volunteer initiatives. Welcome Neighbor STL (n.d.) hosts “supper clubs” to connect newcomers and Americans at community meals, which recently expanded to include catering services and baklava sales to provide refugee women with income opportunities. The Immigrant & Refugee Women’s Program (n.d.) matches volunteer teachers with adult immigrant and refugee learners to develop English and life skills, as well as to promote intercultural communication and understanding.

<sup>6</sup> Participants who were “resettled refugees” were granted refugee status under terms of the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention and resettled to the United States via the U.S. State Department’s refugee resettlement program. Asylum seekers are those who left their home countries to seek protections in another country, with special protections outlined under the 1951 Convention. They have legally claimed asylum and are waiting to determine if they

interviews lasting between 30 to 60 minutes. Notably, semi-structured interviews are commonly used by social scientists “because there is a degree of structure that allows for cross-referencing across interview participants, but there is also scope for more in-depth probing on issues of interest” and are less likely to miss “important insights” that more narrow, structured interviews could miss (Lamont, 2015, p. 84). Therefore, most interview questions were intentionally open and broad, providing respondents with the opportunity to share a wide range of reflections and stories. (For sample semi-structured interview questions, see the appendix.) Interviews were conducted in private rooms within public places, such as at community centers, churches, and libraries. Language interpretation was unnecessary, since participants had all acquired the language proficiency necessary to communicate effectively in English.

Preliminary research findings are based on interview data with ten respondents. The interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 36 years old and originated from conflict-affected countries in Eastern Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Four respondents were resettled refugees, three applied for (and were granted) asylum in the United States after arriving on temporary visas, and two had asylum cases pending. A tenth respondent offers an interesting case; they were born in the U.S. to foreign parents and therefore hold U.S. citizenship, but they spent their childhood overseas. Despite their legal status, they returned to the U.S. due to forced displacement and identify as a member of the refugee community. Respondents were all currently enrolled in American community colleges or universities or had graduated from the system in recent years. These initial interviews offer important preliminary research themes for further consideration.

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will be afforded refugee status. Others were granted refugee status, which comes with the right to remain in the United States (see International Organization for Migration, 2011).

## Findings on Refugees' Higher Education Experiences

First, displaced students interviewed for this study highlighted challenges associated with understanding the complex American higher education system, including navigating the admissions process and applying for financial aid. “When I was in high school, I didn’t know where to apply – how should I know where to apply? My parents never went to college,” said Honorine<sup>7</sup> (22, Burundi). Hassan (22, Syria) noted that “almost everyone at school has some idea about how the system worked, but not me.” He added that when he tried to ask advisors questions, their explanations assumed that he already had a working knowledge of U.S. higher education: “They do not know how it is to be here and not know anything.” Fatima (20, Iraq) is responsible for filling out her financial aid paperwork, since her parents lack the language skills to do so. She notes that this process scares her, and that she fears accidentally filling something out incorrectly and “going to jail.” When seeking academic guidance, she has encountered academic advisors who were vague and unhelpful – and that has discouraged her from scheduling further appointments. “In terms of more personal guidance, I think it’s a little lacking,” she said. When it comes to applying for scholarships, she says she often feels like she’s “not worthy” of them compared to other students. Indeed, most respondents noted the need for scholarships aimed at supporting refugee students. “Refugee students need scholarships. Most people are scared, they don’t want to go into debt,” said Immaculee (21, Tanzania). She added that a lot of scholarships require essays, but refugees struggle to write in English. They are at a disadvantage compared to native speakers and “it’s hard to compete.” Fatima notes that many scholarships are for specific fields of study, but that excludes students like her who are still figuring out their next steps. Sometimes the terminology associated with applying for

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<sup>7</sup> Names were changed to protect the identities of respondents. Interviewees’ age and country of origin are noted on first reference.

admission and aid is also confusing; few administrators take the time to explain the difference between “subsidized” and “unsubsidized” loans, for example. Yusuf (33, Turkey) took on multiple jobs to pay for his education after financial requests were denied, leaving him with little time and opportunity to get involved on campus or make community connections. “There [were] no scholarships... they want you to be a citizen or a permanent resident,” he said. “I was trying to survive... I could not attend anything. And this is going to have a negative impact on my career.”

Second, interviewees primarily rely on their personal social networks for information about higher education – with positive and negative consequences. “You learn your information from your community,” said Murat (24, Turkey). “Not your government, not your public system... You’re just not sure where else to go. I have friends in Germany, and they get a social worker to help them. Here, it’s up to you. I’m always searching Google.” He chose his college based on a friend’s advice, and he admits that he’s heavily dependent on that friend for filling out paperwork and decision-making. Gökhan (25, Turkey) relied on a friend to help him complete his online application, visit campus, and enroll in courses at first. He chose his institution, in large part, because “there are other Turkish immigrants who go there.” He said that his school sends him emails about federal aid and other resources, but it is “really overwhelming” and he mostly asks friends to answer questions and help him navigate the system. Fatima similarly responded: “I talk to people that I know and I listen to their experiences,” noting her parents don’t understand the American system and she has anxiety about going to academic counselors after having a bad experience. Those negative experiences can have community-wide repercussions, she admits; while networks are important sources of information, community members can also discourage students from continuing their studies if they’ve witnessed or experienced frustrating challenges. Immaculee contends that many refugee students to go university or community college and “see how hard it is. They decide they’d rather work or get married,” and that message is communicated to other refugee students in their community. Many of her friends experienced this, struggling especially with English reading and writing. “High school is

much more basic,” she said. After that, “they expect you to write like a college student.”

Third, cultural differences sometimes make it difficult for our respondents to navigate and integrate into their college communities. Jelena (36, Bosnia) admits that she wasn’t prepared for the cultural transition to American life, assuming that she was going to “Beverly Hills and Melrose Place” when she moved to the U.S. Midwest. “That was the perception I had at the time,” she said with a laugh. Meanwhile, American students rarely have cultural knowledge about refugees’ home communities. Murat joked that most Americans think Turkey is a lunch meat. “If you have an abroad experience, you know where Turkey is. Otherwise, no.” Relatedly, Karim (29, Egypt) admits that

when multiple nationalities and races come together, there are pros and cons. The pros are you can get to see other cultures, but the cons are they may not like you the way you are...The first interaction is the most difficult part. You don’t understand each other, and people are afraid to ask clarification questions.

Sometimes, lack of cultural knowledge combines with financial vulnerability in dangerous ways; for instance, refugee students are sometimes targeted by money making scams. Honorine paid \$2,000 to a fake recruiter who promised to find her lucrative daycare jobs. She lost her money and couldn’t afford books or tuition. She only returned to school because she could borrow some money from friends. “My counselors, my professors, never knew what was going on with me,” she said. “You just push on. Fake it until you make it.”

Fourth, family relationships and cultural dynamics at home can also impact interviewees’ educational plans. Sometimes those impacts are positive and supportive: Jelena intended to go to community college with her high school classmates and “figure it out,” for instance, but her mother had other ideas. “My mother was like, ‘Oh no you’re not. Go to a normal college. Why do you have to be like everyone else?’ She was a big influence there, she thought you should pick a college that you would enjoy.” Many

students, such as Honorine, made decisions based on what older siblings had done before them; her sister had gone to community college, so that was the path most open to her. But she again warns that older people set the standard – and that standard sometimes includes giving up and dropping out. Indeed, sometimes cultural and family dynamics at home represent negative roadblocks to higher education. For Honorine, for instance, her parents worry about her becoming “too American” and feminist. “You’re raised to be a ‘home person,’ a wife – but when you go to the university, you take cases and meet people. [My parents think] I’m brainwashed, it’s hard for them to accept. I can’t be who I want to be,” she said, noting that her parents were particularly upset when she took a class on global gender rights. Fatima considers her parents “strict and religious,” which means they want her home when she is not in class – she doesn’t have the freedom to pursue internships or volunteer experiences, nor can she study at an out-of-town institution. (These restrictions are not placed on her brother.) Fatima says she’s “so isolated” because of parental regulations, which also factor into what classes she takes and what field of study she pursues. While she would like a career in the fine arts, her parents want her to study an “acceptable” field; “They want me to have an ‘actual’ degree.”

Fifth, respondents stress that faculty do not always understand the unique challenges facing respondents, especially when it comes to language barriers. Honorine notes that universities put international students in the “same box” as refugee students, but “they aren’t the same thing”; international students might have an accent, but they have different experiences than refugee students and tend to have better writing and comprehension skills. She notes that professors often assume she understands terminology because her spoken English is good, but there is often a wide gap between spoken and written English skills. “Some professors still don’t understand even if you explain it to them,” she said. “How can you not write if you can speak English?” But these are two different things. Some are very picky on grammar; I can try to do it if you show me how, I’m willing to do it, but many won’t let you resubmit.” Immaculee says she receives writing support from her university’s academic

resource center, but the quality of her tutors and editors varies greatly depending on the person she is assigned. “I try to do enough to pass the class, that is always the goal,” she said. These challenges sometimes come as a surprise: “I came here thinking that I spoke English very fluently,” said Jelena. “As soon as I stepped on the ground, I realized how little I knew...It was a shock and it took me a while to adjust. Speaking English was not necessarily easy, and neither was understanding it.” Once an all-A student, Jelena received her first failing grade in American high school. “That was a blow. I basically cried every day for about six months because it was so challenging.” Similarly, Karim attended an English school in his home country and was startled by how unprepared he was for American school: “The English we learned in Egypt was totally different. They said it was British, but I went to Britain and also here, and I don’t know where they came up with that.” While immersion is a good way to learn language, Jelena notes that having more resources (and patience) for non-native English speakers would be useful. “In some ways I appreciated that I was treated the same as everyone else, I kind of liked that,” she said. “But at times it would have been nice to have that extra support when you needed it.”

Yet sixth, faculty members and other support staff are often a key point-of-contact for encouraging our interviewees to continue their studies. Yara (26, Palestine/Syria) had such a terrible experience at the university counseling center that she never went back (“it did more damage than good” because the counselor did not understand her cultural background and story) but then found the support she needed from a dedicated staff member with training in multicultural studies. Honorine had a college professor that she describes as being “like my brother” because he put in extra effort to make sure she graduated on time and understood how things like online course scheduling worked. “I don’t think I would have graduated without him,” she said. Yusuf said a faculty member was “like a mother” because she was “caring, helpful, compassionate” in helping him apply for scholarships and locating pro-bono legal assistance. Similarly, Karim expressed appreciation for professors who accommodated his work schedule and gave him extra help: “I would ask to come at weird hours, they

never told me not to come. Most of the professors were from different countries, sometimes from the U.S., but all of them were super helpful regardless of nationality or race. That was one thing that really helped me keep going. Definitely, that was the power of God.” Fatima also notes that one professor was “really supportive of me as an individual,” sitting down to discuss career plans and talking about challenges she faced at home. “She offered me information that my parents didn’t know.”

Lastly, administrators also tend to confuse international students in general with our displaced respondents, which leads to miscommunication and uncertainty about processing paperwork. Hassan said that if he could change anything about his institution, it would be making sure that people know the differences between refugees, asylum-seekers, and immigrants. “It is frustrating when I have to explain to an admissions officer what an asylum seeker is,” he said. Relatedly, Murat’s admissions paperwork at community college was initially processed as an international student; admissions recruiters were “confused” and said they needed to “talk to someone” to understand the process for displaced students. He was able to show a copy of his high school diploma but could not get academic transcripts, since his high school had been shut down. University officials eventually allowed him to submit a waiver for the missing transcripts. Preliminary research suggests that these challenges also exist in American high schools. Honorine said that high school guidance counselors and teachers “didn’t know what to do with [refugees]” and focused most attention on integrating them with other students, rather than talking about higher education and future careers. “People don’t know how to search for colleges, how to prepare, what that environment will be like,” she said, reiterating how refugee students seek out help and information from their social networks when their counselors fail them.

### **Concluding Reflections**

Findings from this preliminary research study highlight how refugees and asylum seekers may face unique challenges in pursuit of higher education. Interviews reveal that displaced respondents often struggle to

understand the complicated American higher education system and they primarily rely on their personal social networks to garner information about higher education, for good and for bad. Cultural differences can complicate interviewees' attempts to integrate into their new communities, and both family relationships and cultural dynamics at home may also create educational challenges. Faculty sometimes fail to understand the challenges facing our respondents and administrators tend to confuse international students in general with displaced interviewees, yet faculty members and other support staff are often key for their success. While refugee and asylum-seeking students who participated in this study have complicated and challenging experiences within U.S. higher education, they remain determined to continue their studies and earn college degrees.

This preliminary data illustrates the need for further study, particularly as countries like the United States experience growing anti-migrant sentiment. While existing scholarship largely ignores the issue of displaced students at the college and university levels, we hope that this study serves as a starting point for further research. For example, one theme that emerges from this data is the experiential differences between traditional "international" students and displaced students. Another point to consider is how challenges facing displaced students are also similar to the obstacles to undocumented migrant students.<sup>8</sup> A possible future agenda, for instance, could explore the ways that refugee and asylum seeking students are similar to, as well as different from, undocumented youth. Marisol Clark-Ibáñez (2015) explores the ways in which undocumented Latino youth navigate multiple social worlds. Her research participants struggled with stress associated with the threat of deportation,

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<sup>8</sup> Fons Coomans, UNESCO Chair in Human Rights and Peace, argues that "[m]aking sure undocumented migrants are equally able to access education is one of several challenges in realizing the fundamental human rights of refugees" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2018). He contends that while the needs of refugees are recognized by the 1951 Refugee Convention, international human rights norms still lack adequate protection for the educational rights of asylum seekers and irregular or undocumented migrants.

financial barriers, and socio-legal challenges within the greater community – in many ways, experiences that are shared by refugee and asylum seeking students. Clark-Ibáñez (2015) found that “the university campus had an important role in setting the tone and offering resources that directly affected the trust building and educational successes of these students” (p. 137). Similar to what we observed in our interviews with displaced students, campus actors such as faculty members and administrators had the ability to encourage or discourage students in their pursuit of higher education. Recommendations to strengthen institutional commitment to undocumented students, to provide specific resources and trainings, to encourage informed and aware pedagogy, and to foster more responsible staff and services to truly serve vulnerable student populations (Clark-Ibáñez, 2015, pp. 138-141) can all be potentially adapted to respond to displaced students’ needs.

With our interview data and Clark-Ibáñez’s (2015) recommendations in mind, we end this article with several starting points for supporting displaced students as they pursue higher education.

### ***Financial aid opportunities for asylum seekers***

Delays in asylum processing may have serious financial consequences for displaced students, since refugee status is necessary for a variety of need-based and merit-based scholarships, as well as federal student loans. The U.S. government does not make guarantees on how long the asylum process will take, but some asylum seekers can wait years before their cases are decided. One student asylum seeker was told that a decision was likely within two weeks of their asylum interview; at the time of this writing, two years later, the student was still waiting. The backlog of cases in U.S. immigration courts continues to rise dramatically (see: Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, 2020), while some asylum seekers wait years for their initial asylum interview and eventual status determination. Asylum seekers can apply for work authorization after their case has been pending for 150 days, but they remain in limbo until a decision is made. “The backlogs and delays can cause prolonged separation

of refugee families, leave family members abroad in dangerous situations, and make it more difficult to retain pro bono counsel for the duration of the asylum seeker's case," explains the American Immigration Council (2018). Colleges and universities should consider offering financial aid opportunities tailored toward displaced students whose asylum cases are still pending. Among some public institutions, universities can also opt to offer in-state tuition to asylum seekers. These options will provide displaced students with wider options for pursuing higher education and, in some cases, prevent students from ending or interrupting their studies.

### ***Training for faculty and staff***

A common theme that emerged from the interview data was that university faculty and staff rarely understand the difference between forced displacement and immigration. By treating refugee and asylum-seeking students simply as "international students," universities fail to address the unique vulnerabilities faced by their displaced student population. This misunderstanding likely leads to failures in student recruitment and retention, as well as leaves displaced students at a disadvantage even if they are able to graduate. To remedy this problem, universities may provide training and other resources to better equip faculty and staff to educate and assist displaced students. University offices associated with admissions, financial aid, academic advising, health services, and other should be aware of the challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers—and have information needed to address those obstacles in a meaningful way. Similarly, many faculty would be better able to support their displaced students if they had a great understanding of their needs.

### ***Building awareness and solidarity on campus***

Anti-migrant fervor has become increasingly "mainstreamed" in the last ten years, accelerated by U.S. President Donald Trump's attempts to drastically reduce migration to the United States. Trump has referred to immigrants and refugees as "an invasion," for instance, while opponents of

migration use social media to demonize migrants, including displaced people (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). Experts warn that anti-immigrant hate groups are using the Covid-19 pandemic to conflate migration and public health, thus demonizing newcomers as a threat to the American polity (Bejarano, 2020). To counter the effects of these dangerous developments, it is imperative that campus communities understand the realities of displacement – including how and why people claim asylum or are resettled in the United States – and identify displaced people as part of their existing student body. To this end, Amnesty International (2018) provides a toolkit for student governments to pass a “Refugees Welcome” resolution in support of refugees on campus. These resolutions aim to support displaced people in their campus community and counter rising anti-refugee sentiments, as well as providing accurate information about displacement.

Higher education cannot erase the loss and trauma associated with forced displacement, but it can provide young people with opportunities to integrate into their new communities, achieve their personal and professional goals, and regain a sense of purpose moving forward. Support for displaced students is imperative for educators devoted to the values of HRE and the fundamental human right to education. These preliminary research findings illustrate the need for further attention to refugee and asylum-seeking students – those already in our classrooms, as well as those who are considering advanced study. By acknowledging that displaced students face unique challenges and vulnerabilities, campus communities may begin the work of truly supporting refugees and asylum seekers on their college journeys.

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