Representations of Higher Education Among Adult Refugees in the US

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Introduction

Recent estimates reveal there are 22.5 million refugees and 65.6 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, and these numbers are growing (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017). Over half of all refugees in the world have fled varied forms of conflict or persecution in Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017). While these statistics of the global refugee crisis are seemingly ubiquitous, the implications in local contexts are of paramount concern. The divided burden and responsibility to establish processes and designate resources to accommodate, support, and integrate these individuals into local communities are challenging and exigent (Berti 2015, 44).

According to the Center for Immigration Studies, the United States admitted 22,491 refugees during the 2018 fiscal year, representing a historical low since the start of the US refugee resettlement program (Rush 2018). The politicized rhetoric around the issue of US immigration and recent immigration policy has exacerbated the problem of higher education for refugees in the country, yet the stakes remain high. The importance and urgency of providing equitable structures and educational pathways that support the access and participation of refugees in higher education and the workforce cannot be overstated (Loo and Ortiz 2016).

Background

Transitions to Work and Education

Realistically, effective refugee integration into the labor market and higher education across the country remains an interdisciplinary problem (Disiderio 2016, 8). Many refugees arrive with previous education and work experience that do not aptly translate into the strata of the workforce (Capps, Newland, Fratzke, Groves, Auclair, Fix, and McHugh 2015, 357). While adult refugees tend to find jobs quickly, their incomes are relatively modest compared to other immigrant populations (Disiderio 2016, 8). Herein lies the weighty discrepancy in the recognition and evaluation of professional credentials for refugee and asylum-seeking populations, which often prohibits, complicates, and lengthens the process of securing gainful employment (Capps et al. 2015, 357).

Barriers to Higher Education

Complex socioeconomic and structural disadvantages encumber and can even preclude the educational trajectories of adult refugees seeking to pursue a formal postsecondary degree. In addition to common factors, such as post-traumatic stress, financial hardship, and disrupted education, persons with refugee backgrounds in the United States often face numerous other challenges in their resettlement and adjustment processes, which complicate the pathways to educational attainment and subsequent occupational mobility (Bajwa et al. 2017; Lenette 2016; Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, and Silvagni 2010). Given the lack of financial aid through the US government and slim financial support through higher education institutions, simply affording the tuition cost of a college degree is daunting (Gittleson and Usher 2017). This is a microcosm of the global landscape of higher education for refugees and at-risk migrants. In fact, a mere "1% of refugees worldwide have access to postsecondary education as compared to global enrollment rates of 34%" (Phan 2018, 1).

In addition to a sense of *moral obligation*, Lenette (2016) argues tertiary institutions and stakeholders ought to capitalize on the *socioeconomic impetus* of

higher education for refugees as a means to their greater livelihood and contribution to society (1312-13). This rationale calls first for an increased awareness of the unique needs and current experiences of refugee students and prospective students among educators and administrators. Secondly, it is imperative to re-evaluate pathways, systems, and structures of access and support for refugees in order to promote holistic student success and positive graduate outcomes (1312-13).

Problem Statement

My research project will address this critical gap through the exploration of first-hand narratives of persons with refugee status, or non-citizens who self-identify as refugees or asylum seekers in the geographic context of the Washington, D.C. Metro area. The qualitative study will seek to address the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of adult refugees regarding higher education and educational attainment?

2. What are the perceptions held by adult refugees regarding access to and participation in higher education?

3. What is the impact of existing policies and models of educational support for adult refugees, particularly in the D.C. Metro area?

Literature Review

While an increasingly significant issue in the fields of higher education and comparative international education, literature on adult refugees' experiences in the United States is quite limited. To date, the majority of research and reporting on refugees in international education focuses on transitions and pathways for students from K-12 to advanced education. Yet these students' narratives cannot be detached from their family units and their parents' educational experiences. Thus, the little attention specifically on older adults with refugee backgrounds who have been permanently resettled, with or without families present, underlies a cavity in the research.

The academic literature on higher education for refugees is largely concentrated on educational support services in high admission countries, notably Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. These findings can be versatile for institutional contexts in the United States whose admissions systems might identify students with refugee backgrounds. However, while a few US higher education institutions serve as the vanguard for supporting refugee students, there is staggering fragmentation in information, access support, and infrastructure for refugee applicants across the landscape of higher education in the United States (Phan 2018). Few studies and reports have focused on higher education for adults with a refugee background, let alone in the scope of community college education (Tuliao, Hatch, and Torraco 2017, 17). In fact, "what little research there is relating to refugees in community college…has been largely tangential to other related immigrant groups" such as undocumented immigrants (Tuliao, Hatch, and Torraco 2017, 17).

Lenette (2016) points clearly to these gaps in knowledge and practice for refugee support when she explains that "access to university alone then is nowhere near enough to achieve meaningful social, cultural and economic outcomes for refugee students" (1312). A growing number of domestic organizations, coalitions, and programs have risen to the occasion to address this issue, for example, information-sharing mechanisms through University Alliance for Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM). However, there is still a clear need for scholarship and advocacy for this underserved student population in higher education.

Methods

Participants in the study will include adults who self-identify as refugees, not excluding individuals who identify as asylum seekers or forcibly displaced. Adult refugee students enrolled in postsecondary education at the community college level will be recruited, as well as non-students or prospective students in the D.C. Metro region. Given the focus on educational transitions, attitudes, and aspirations, the personal narratives of adult students and non-students alike will be valuable to

the study. Additionally, participants selected for the study will meet predetermined criteria, including age (25 years or older), location of residence (in the D.C. Metro region), and length of stay in the United States (5 years or less).

Individuals associated with a local nonprofit, with whom contact has already been established, will be recruited for interviews and interpretative focus groups, and referrals will be obtained through snowball sampling until saturation in the data is reached. Open-ended questions using semi-structured interview protocols will be designed to capture the breadth and depth of each participant's experiences, and both participant responses and observations will be recorded and transcribed. Codes and the coding scheme for the data analysis will draw largely from the guiding theoretical model for the study, and themes that emerge through coding will be examined in depth. Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological systems model serves as the guiding conceptual framework for the proposed qualitative study and analysis (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn 2010, 160-167). Through a narrative inquiry rooted in an ethnographic approach, the study will also serve as a critical exercise for participants to reflexively engage with the topic, while (de)constructing their own sense-making processes in relation to contextual or societal norms (Cohen and Crabtree 2006; Crossman 2017; Garfinkel 1967, as cited in Wroe 2012). In order to frame these participant experiences, I will also investigate the anecdotal impact of existing policies and models of access and support at the community college level.

Conclusion

As a form of narrative inquiry, the qualitative findings are predicted to present a richer, more nuanced understanding of adult refugees and their attitudes towards higher education during significant stages of their transition and integration into US society. Relevant to the work and interests of college leaders, policymakers, international education administrators, student affairs personnel, and other stakeholders, I expect the experiential findings and implications to potentially benefit the wider scope of research on

refugee education, higher education policies and practices for refugee-status persons, and community and collaborative endeavors, in order to effectively support the integration and livelihood of these individuals and their families.

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