Internationalization and Inclusion: Refugees in Community Colleges

A collaborative outreach event organized and planned by Cornell University South & Southeast Asia Programs, Syracuse University South Asia Center, Mohawk Valley Community College, and Onondaga Community College
Goals

• Address refugee education at community colleges and explore the tapped and untapped potential for internationalizing and enriching the community college experience for all students
• Stimulate discussions on best practices for supporting refugees in community college and integrating their culture, history, and communities into the educational landscape of campus
• Provide background and contextualize the arrival of recent refugees in upstate New York from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Somalia
• Fund two faculty and one administrator from an MSI to join the conference
The conference opened with informational presentations on the cultural, historical, and refugee experiences of three major recent refugee populations: Karen and other ethnic groups from Burma, Nepalis from Bhutan, and Somali-Bantu refugees.
Through panels and workshops, participants discussed best practices for initiating administrative and curricular changes across campuses that foster global learning and encourage cross-cultural understanding.
Panel Topics

• Resettlement Process and Challenges
• Refugee Student Panel
• Higher Education/Refugee Collaboration Models and Ethics
• Art as Connection: Refugee Self-Expression
In the higher education/refugee collaboration panel, concrete models were presented around research and student engagement. This panel included participants from SUNY Brockport, SUNY Polytechnic Institute of Technology, Nazareth College, and SUNY Buffalo State.
The refugee student panel featured three students whose higher education experience began in a community college. All three students agreed that refugee students often fall between the cracks of systems that were designed to provide support to international students and first-generation and minority students. Refugee students don’t fall easily into either category.
Muslima Ali (far right), now a student at Utica College, echoed these sentiments and described how working as an RA for international students has given her a way to play a positive role on her new 4-year campus.
A significant portion of the audience was made up of refugee students from Ithaca, Utica, and other parts of the state. These young people were encouraged and inspired by participating in an event focused on their communities and concerns.
Internationalization workshop component

- Structured break-out and brainstorming sessions were developed by Christopher Sunderlin, Founder of Midtown Utica Community Center, and facilitated by refugee students.
- Conference participants discussed five topics
  - new courses tailored for refugee students
  - training needed for college/staff/faculty
  - biggest challenges facing refugee college students and ways to overcome them
  - ways of incorporating refugee students on campus
  - wildest thing you’ve done to help a refugee
Biggest Challenges Facing Refugee College Students and Ways to Overcome

Lack of ESL resources prior to entering college
- delayed in college, English language learning needed
- struggle with the first-year lower-division courses

Adjusting to American education system:
- finding a support system (peer, mentoring, support groups)
- "college culture" differences
A traveling photo exhibit featuring photographs of regional refugees taken by Lynne Browne was on display at the conference. This exhibit stimulated dynamic conversations during the breaks and exposed people to the faces of refugees.
As a supplement to the more formal presentations on the background of refugees, give-away books for further education included: *Forced to Flee: Visual stories of Refugee Youth from Burma* by Erika Berg and a bilingual book titled *Nepali Anthology: A Collection of Tales from Bhutanese Refugees* by Renee Christman.
Participant Feedback

• “I really appreciated the wealth of perspectives and diversity of background present in the discussion. It helped me to see new possibilities that, as a faculty member and researcher, I hadn’t been thinking of.”

• “Great group of people attended. Beautiful session with full depth of information about refugees. At the end, I walked away with a lot of information about refugees and their life stories.”

• “I witnessed a whole table of female Burmese high school students of Karen origin talk with one of the Karen student panelists at lunch about her educational trajectory. They asked her a million questions, talked about the gender differences between the ambitions of female refugee high school students compared to male refugee high school students, and discussed the pressures they face from their parents’ expectations of their eventual school and career success.”
Take-Aways

• Participants gained a better understanding of the cultural background of certain refugee groups through presentations & give-away books

• Educators and social service providers in attendance made important connections that could lead to future partnerships from the networking that the conference made possible

• Young refugee students in attendance were encouraged and inspired by participating in an event focused on their communities and concerns and also made great connections with each other

• Current internationalization efforts at community colleges are happening through courses with service-learning components that involve work with local refugee communities
Credits and Resources

- Cornell University Southeast Asia Program
  - https://seap.einaudi.cornell.edu/
- Cornell University South Asia Program
  - https://sap.einaudi.cornell.edu/
- Syracuse University South Asia Center
  - https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/program
- Midtown Utica Community Center
  - http://www.midtownutica.org/
- Mohawk Valley Community College
  - http://www.mvcc.edu/
- Onondaga Community College
  - http://www.sunyocc.edu/
- Photos by Lynne Browne and Manoly Sisavanh
Resources continued: Higher Education/Refugee Collaboration models

• SUNY Polytechnic Institute of Technology and the Refugees Starting Over Project in Utica
  • https://startingoverutica.com/

• Nazareth College
  • Communication Sciences and Disorders graduate program
    • https://www2.naz.edu/dept/communications/

• SUNY Buffalo State
  • Volunteer Service-Learning Center
    • http://vslc.buffalostate.edu/
  • Community Academic Center
    • https://cac.buffalostate.edu/