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Barriers to Professional Integration Among Latino Immigrants in Missouri

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Abstract

Immigrants who received a college education abroad face a myriad of challenges in reentering their professions or fields in the United States. These barriers to foreign-trained immigrants withhold benefits from receiving communities including cultural and linguistic expertise in health care and other professions. By hindering individuals' and families' economic self-sufficiency, such barriers also slow the integration of immigrants into American society.

Challenges to immigrants facing professional integration are receiving increased attention by researchers and enforcing some national and local initiatives to directly assist immigrants with professional integration. As the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA), the largest immigrant advocacy organization in New England, promotes professional integration through its newest initiative, the New Americans Integration Institute. This paper explores these challenges and draw lessons from successful models that may benefit "new destination" states.

This paper will summarize commonly cited barriers to professional integration of foreign-educated immigrants with a special focus on Latino immigrants in Missouri. This paper will also identify some promising models for professional integration in other states.

Keywords: integration, immigrants, education, professional development

Latino Immigrants in Missouri

In 2010, nearly four percent of Missouri's population, approximately a quarter of a million persons, was foreign born. Among this population, 28.1% identified themselves as Latino or Hispanic. Missouri is one of the states experiencing an increase in its proportion of immigrants and number of Latino immigrants has increased substantially in the past decade. While Missouri ranks 41st among the states in terms of its' foreign-born population, it ranked 16th in the proportional increase of its' immigrant population between 2000 and 2010. Over 71,000 people born in Latin America lived in Missouri in 2010, representing an increase of over 83% since 2000.

Nearly 45% of immigrants from Mexico living in Missouri in 2010 had entered the U.S. within the past decade and half of the immigrants came from other parts of Latin America. Yet, as will be discussed, even among long-time residents, Latino immigrants do not do as well in measures of professional integration (Batalove, Fix, & Creticos, 2008).

In Missouri, those who speak Spanish at home are less likely to hold a college degree than those who speak only English or other languages; 23% of people who speak Spanish at home held college degrees in 2009. Nationally, Latin American immigrants earn less than immigrants from other regions and this trend is also present in Missouri. Immigrants from Latin America also demonstrated the highest rates of poverty in Missouri. Slightly over 27% of households in Missouri with members born in Latin America lived in poverty in 2009, compared with 19% of all foreign-born households. A further 32.4% lived between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty level.

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates that "brain-waste" or the unemployment or underemployment of college-educated workers, affected approximately 7,500 immigrants, or about 22% of college-educated immigrants, in Missouri in 2010. The U.S. census does not collect data on whether an immigrant obtained his or her degree abroad or in the U.S. and MPI estimates that 53.4% of highly skilled immigrants received their college education abroad.

Immigrants and Workforce Needs in Missouri

In an economy in which so many workers struggle with unemployment, a focus on the professional integration needs of high skilled immigrants entering the American workforce has the potential to elicit objections that native-born workers could be left out of economic gains. Yet, research demonstrates that highly skilled immigrants fill shortages not met by domestic workers and additionally spur labor growth within destination states (Atwater & Jones, 2004). Barry Chiswick, a professor at the University of Illinois, studied the international mobility of highly skilled immigrants and found that highly skilled immigrants lead to a "long-run feedback effect" on the productivity of both the less skilled and highly skilled workers on the destination economy" (Chiswick, 2005, p.4). Skilled immigrant professionals, by increasing productivity, create increased demand for less-skilled laborers that are integral to the production process, facilitating job opportunities for blue-collared workers and lifting economic prospects across the spectrum of educational attainment (Batalove, Fix, & Creticos, 2008). Moreover, highly skilled immigrants stimulate job growth through entrepreneurship, technological innovation and tax payment (Wadhwa, Saxenian, Rissing, & Gereffi, 2008; Kaushal, & Fix, 2006; Batalove, Fix, & Creticos, 2008; Smith & Edmonston, 1997; Friedbar, 2007).

Projections of workforce needs nationwide, and in Missouri, suggest opportunities for highly skilled immigrants to help meet employer needs in particular sectors including health care. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that between 2008 and 2018 an aging baby-boomer generation will continue to necessitate higher numbers of healthcare providers. Given increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the U.S. population, immigrants can also assist in providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services to local populations.

The Missouri Economic Research Information Center has projected job openings in Missouri for specific professions in the years 2008-2018 (n.d.). Among professions requiring a bachelor's degree or

higher, that are projected to offer thousands of new positions over this period, include: 1) accountants; 2) auditors; 3) business operations specialists; 4) computer systems analysts; 5) pharmacists; and 6) teachers from pre-school through grade 12. Registered nurses, a position requiring an associate's degree, has high projected growth as well. Many professions in these same fields, and projected to grow substantially, include: 1) bookkeeping; 2) accounting; 3) auditing clerks; 4) child care workers; 5) teacher assistants; 6) pharmacy technicians; 7) home health aides; 8) medical assistants; and 9) medical secretaries. These professions require on-the-job training as opposed to a college education. The procedures immigrants must navigate to achieve re-licensing in regulated fields, or even to achieve recognition that a foreign degree represents equivalent educational attainment as one received in the U.S., can be time-consuming, expensive and arduous. Therefore, professions in an immigrant's field of education, requiring less educational credentials, may provide experience, networking opportunities and a livable wage while an immigrant pursues the steps needed to practice their original profession.

Challenges to Professional Integration

Upon arrival in the U.S., immigrants must concern themselves with obtaining shelter, food, and other necessities. Those whose status is not tied to an employer's sponsorship may be forced to accept "survival jobs." High-skilled immigrants may initially find jobs in restaurants, as taxi drivers, and in other low-skilled positions with expectations that these placements will be temporary. Increased time in the U.S., specifically residence of a decade or more, is correlated with improved professional outcomes (Batalove, Fix, & Creticos, 2008).

However, increased time in the U.S. does not always lead to professional integration barriers. MPI has identified limited English proficiency, Latin American and African origin and undocumented status as three characteristics correlated with less improvement in employment, occupational status

and wages of highly skilled immigrants that were educated abroad (Batalove, Fix & Creticos, 2008). Over a third of Latin American immigrants were still working in unskilled jobs 11 years after arrival in the U.S., a concerning statistics that led MPI to recommend further research about the "persistent underemployment" of Latin American immigrants (Batalove, Fix, & Creticos, 2008).

The following sections briefly outline some commonly identified, and often interrelated, factors presenting challenges to foreign-educated immigrants' professional integration.

Re-credentialing and Re-Licensing Procedures

Professions may be categorized as regulated or unregulated with professional licensure by a state licensing board required to practice in the former but not the latter. In regulated and unregulated professions, immigrants encounter challenges in demonstrating educational and professional competence.

Immigrants who obtained a higher education abroad must often use a credential evaluation service in order to demonstrate to an employer, a licensing board, or a U.S. institution of higher education that their credentials are comparable to those that would be obtained in the U.S. The re-credentialing process involves extra time and expense. Once their credentials have been evaluated, highly skilled immigrants must sometimes repeat portions of their education in the United States in order to reach the requirements of employers or licensing boards.

In regulated professions, the time and money required to achieve re-licensing can be substantial and information about the procedures required to attain re-licensing, which varies by state, is not always easily accessible. The cost, time and effort required to pass licensure examinations given by state licensing boards presents many challenges, one being that practical experience is a component of licensure requirements. Immigrants must also obtain practical experience in the United States before being granted certification to practice in their particular fields.

Limited English Proficiency

Immigrants from non-English speaking countries can remain trapped in jobs that do not utilize their training if they do not have access to individuals, networks, or ESOL centers to help them in acquiring the English proficiency, including proficiency in the English terminology specific to their professions. MPI has found that LEP status doubles a workers likelihood of working in an unskilled job (Batalove, Fix, & Creticos, 2008). Among the civilian workforce in Missouri over 16 years of age, approximately 38% of those who spoke Spanish at home in 2009, were considered limited in English proficiency (LEP) making this challenge highly relevant to Missouri's Latino immigrant population.

Geographic Origin and Employer Bias

As noted, even after residing in the U.S. for more than a decade, Latino and African immigrants lag behind groups from other origins in measures of professional integration. MPI notes that an immigrant's region of birth may influence a range of variables, including: 1) professional opportunities in the country of origin; 2) socioeconomic and linguistic constraints; and 3) the degree of similarities or differences between an origin's cultural and professional practices compared to practices in the United States. Since different countries have greater or fewer similarities with cultural norms of the U.S. workplace, it is difficult to determine the degree of correlation in geographic origin with successful professional integration, due to discrimination versus other factors. However, it would be disingenuous to overlook the potential influence of employer bias, such as false perceptions about qualifications due to accented English or negative associations with an immigrant's place of origin.

Immigration Status

MPI has found that refugees and diversity immigrants suffered the greatest declines in job quality upon immigrating. Family-sponsored immi-

grants enjoyed better occupational outcomes than those of refugees and diversity immigrants but less outcomes than employer-sponsored immigrants. MPI suggests that this effect may be due to the assistance of relatives that family-sponsored immigrants are more frequently able to rely on.

A factor inextricably tied to immigration status and impacting professional integration outcomes is work authorization. Work authorization is, of course, unavailable to undocumented immigrants, but also to many categories of immigrants with statuses as well. For example, asylum applicants are ineligible to receive work authorization for the first six months after applying for asylum, and in practice, this wait often extends beyond a year or even two.

Family Responsibilities

Immigrant professionals who care for family members may find the processes too demanding to professionally integrate financially. Another barrier includes immigrant professions's busy schedules making it difficult to pursue these numerous steps. New American Media (NAM), a nationwide collaboration of ethnic news organizations, found a "substantial percentage" of immigrant women who held professional jobs prior to immigrating that were forced to take less-skilled jobs. Apparently this is part of the need to prioritize the well being of family members. The challenges facing immigrant heads-of-household are not unlike the challenges facing native-born heads-of-household. At the same time, immigrants may face additional challenges due to their status as immigrants. For example, their wages may stretch far less due to inadequate health insurance coverage and the need to cover more expenses out of pocket ("Poll Finds Women Immigrants Confront Many Barriers", 2009). Immigrant families' ineligibility for, or unawareness of, public benefits and services may force heads-of-household to work longer hours at less-skilled jobs to survive, precluding the investments of time and money needed to advance professionally.

Homeownership Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin

X	Total	White	Black	Asian	(2000) Hispanic	(2009) Hispanic
U.S.	66.2	71.3	46.3	53.4	45.7	47
Alabama	72.5	77.8	57.6	48.4	43.9	43
Arkansas	69.4	73.4	50.1	50.7	39.6	49
Florida	70.1	74.1	50.2	60.6	55.8	56
Georgia	67.9	75.3	50.8	55.4	37.4	43
Kentucky	72.3	73.6	41.4	42.8	36.4	37
Louisiana	69.4	75.4	51.8	53.4	51.4	51
Mississippi	68.4	78.5	60.7	51.2	45.4	45
N. Carolina	72.2	75.1	52.5	52.5	31.3	47
Oklahoma	69.9	71.9	44	48.2	45.7	47
S. Carolina	72.2	77.2	60.9	54.4	39.4	41
Tennessee	69.9	74.1	50.5	50.5	35.8	44
Texas	63.8	68.7	46.4	53.1	56.1	57

Promising Models to Streamline Professional Integration

Immigrants' professional integration needs are beginning to receive more attention by promising

national and local initiatives that new destination states as well as established ones can learn. Proof of integration success around Massachusetts and nationally have focused on overcoming the challenges that remain, MIRA has recently embarked

on a new initiative, the New Americans Integration Institute (NAII). The major underwriter of the NAII is The Boston Foundation, a supporter of MIRA since its time of inception. Support for the Citizenship Campaign of the NAII is also provided by the Fish Family Foundation. The NAII targets obstacles to integration in the areas of: 1) language and citizenship acquisition; 2) Immigrant entrepreneurship; 3) immigrant workforce development; and 4) native-born opposition to immigration and integration. In the area of immigrant workforce development, MIRA is examining the challenges to professional integration and seeking out best practices to assist highly skilled immigrants with professional integration.

One national collaboration called IMPRINT, comprises five promising initiatives: 1) The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education; 2) The Welcome Back Initiative; 3) The Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians; 4) World Education Services; and 5) Upwardly Global. These models for professional immigrant integration can, and should, inspire replication in other states.

The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE) is a national initiative comprising community colleges and experts in immigrant education. CCCIE has an online database of promising practices in immigrant education in key areas, including: 1)ESL programs; 2)Workforce Training/Career Development; and 3)Community/Employer Partnerships.

World Education Services is a credential evaluation service that is also an IMPRINT member organization, and partnered with CCCIE to deliver workshops to immigrants on how to have their foreign credentials recognized.

The mission of the Welcome Back Initiative (WBI) is, “to build a bridge between the pool of internationally trained health workers living in the United States and the need for linguistically and culturally competent health services in underserved communities”. To that extent, WBI has ten statewide or local initiatives in: 1) California; 2) Colorado; 3) Maryland; 4) Massachusetts; 5) New York; 6) Rhode Island; 7) Texas; and 8) Washington, assisting health care professionals trained abroad to practice in their

fields. Welcome Back Centers provide: 1) support in re-credentialing and re-licensing; 2) finding relevant educational programs; 3) job and volunteer opportunities; and 4) assessing alternative career options. The Boston Welcome Back Center, based at Bunker Hill Community College, provides nurses trained abroad with individual case management to become registered nurses in Massachusetts. Other initiatives of WBI focus on provide services to health care workers in additional professions, including: 1) physicians; 2) dentists; 3) speech therapists; 4) physical therapists; 5) psychologists; 6) social workers; 7) midwives; and 9) pharmacists.

The mission of the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians (WCNP) is, “to be a centralized employment and referral center for the region’s growing immigrant community by promoting immigrant participation in the area’s political, social, and economic life.” Among its professional integration services, WCNP helps connect highly skilled, and other immigrants, find employment and connects them with necessary training. This includes ESOL classes and conducts outreach to employers to help them hire qualified immigrants. WCNP has also produced career guides for immigrant professionals in four professions identified as “high growth” professions in Pennsylvania: 1) accountants; 2) auditors; 3) mechanical engineers; 4) systems analysts; and 5) teachers.

Upwardly Global is an organization with offices in San Francisco, Chicago and New York, providing job search preparation services to highly skilled immigrants and creating employer partnerships to help employers benefit from highly skilled immigrants and to assist highly skilled immigrants integrate into the workforce.

Conclusion

Highly skilled immigrants promote innovation and job growth in communities and have an important role in addressing workforce needs, particularly in the healthcare industries. Despite their potential to contribute to a stronger economy, these immigrants face numerous challenges to practicing

in their fields of training and often remain trapped in survival jobs. The challenges facing immigrant professionals that are educated abroad should concern anyone interested in immigrant integration.

As more immigrants professionally integrate, this is a topic beginning to receive wider attention in the United States. New destination states are in a unique position to adopt promising models to leverage the benefits of increased immigration. Nearly three-fifths of Latin American immigrant households are living at, or below, 200% of the federal poverty level. Adoption of the best practices to facilitate more successful professional integration has the potential to result in increased economic self-sufficiency among highly skilled Latino immigrants and all immigrants in Missouri. Together, immigrant advocates, academics, educators, licensing boards, credential evaluators, employers, professional associations and policy makers should collaborate to identify and adopt the best practices for reducing “brain-waste” among highly skilled immigrants.

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