



Prepared for PAIR Houston

Refugee Access to Higher Education

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Meet the Team



Terence Bailey II

Policy Analysis, Social Advocacy

“My favorite part about this project is getting to understand the refugee process and seeing how much work needs to be done to help refugees.”

Ella Johnson-McGowan

Policy Analysis, track in State and Local Government

“Being able to research the current policies and supports states and HEIs employ to support refugees has been the most impactful part of this project for me. Seeing what our states and institutions can do better motivates me to help implement change.”



Raven Garrard

Policy Analysis, Education Policy

“I enjoyed getting to speak to the students at PAIR because I learned so much about their experiences and the ways to help them achieve their aspirations.”

Kayla Hart

Nonprofit Management, State and Local Government Policy

“I have enjoyed seeing the team’s hard work come to fruition! I have also loved to learn about the support that institutions provide to accommodate refugee students.”



Lisa Cantu

Public Management, Education Policy

“My favorite element of this capstone has been being able to tangibly witness the impact that this project will have within the PAIR Houston program and interacting with the students that will be impacted.”

Toriano Bryant

Public Management, Education Policy

“I enjoyed having the program participants use their voices to express the impact of the PAIR program.”

Tori McVey

Nonprofit Management, Community Youth Development

“As a proud Houstonian, I have absolutely loved working with PAIR and getting to see the meaningful impact that their services make on the lives of students in my community.”



Nathan Peterson

Policy Analysis, Education Policy

“I really enjoyed coding the state and institutional policy documents to determine the policy landscape.”



Taylor Rapp

Nonprofit Management, International Nongovernmental Organizations

“I enjoyed getting to learn more about the complex environment that is refugee higher education policy across the United States.”



Mikayla Slaydon

Public Management, Educational Social Justice

“My favorite part of the project was getting to work with a topic that emphasizes social justice and advances higher education accessibility. I also loved working with a team that was so obviously passionate about the work and about producing a comprehensive final report.”



Hannah Wilson

Public Management, Education Policy and Management

“The most impactful and memorable part of this project has been hearing the personal stories of the students involved with the PAIR program.”



Yesenia Zavala

Policy Analysis, Education Policy

“This project gave me the opportunity to see the direct impact a dedicated and passionate group of individuals can have on the aspirations of college-going students.”



executive summary

Refugees in the US face many barriers upon arrival, and these are magnified in the higher education context. In Texas, refugee students are not afforded in-state tuition for higher education and institutions do not prioritize access for refugee student populations. PAIR Houston supports refugee students across K-12 and higher education. This project focusses on PAIR's Global Ambassadors program, which provides refugee students with support and resources to navigate the higher education system during their first year of college. Our capstone aimed to identify what specific barriers exist for refugees in the policy landscape, as well as in the PAIR-specific context.

The Capstone group's charge was to address the barriers refugee students face when navigating higher education institutions (HEIs). To achieve this goal, our team focussed on two major objectives: providing PAIR with a policy landscape detailing state and institutional policies that impact refugee students and utilizing interviews with PAIR participants to understand how these barriers play out in the Houston PAIR program context. Our group utilized existing literature on barriers to higher education to build a base of knowledge regarding the factors that impact refugee access to higher education which found that refugees in the United States faced several main barriers in navigating the world of higher education, including language barriers, state and institutional policy barriers, and an overall lack of support in navigating unfamiliar environments. Informed by this literature, we answer the following research questions:

1. What resources support refugee student access and success in higher education?
2. What is the current state and institutional policy landscape that informs refugees access to and success in higher education?
 - a. What state and institution level policies may inform PAIR's future advocacy for improving postsecondary access and success?

Data

Refugees in the US face many barriers upon arrival, and these are magnified in the higher education context. In Texas, refugee students are not afforded in-state tuition for higher education and institutions do not prioritize access for refugee student populations. PAIR Houston supports refugee students across K-12 and higher education. This project focuses on PAIR's Global Ambassadors program, which provides refugee students with support and resources to navigate the higher education system during their first year of college. Our capstone aimed to identify what specific barriers exist for refugees in the policy landscape, as well as in the PAIR-specific context.

We compiled and analyzed both sets of data utilizing MaxQDA. For interviews, we coded and analyzed these interviews to paint a clearer picture of what barriers and supports proved most impactful to PAIR participants' experiences. From this, specific themes related to the refugee student experience emerged. State and institutional policies were coded for specific state and institutional policies. We then created state "profiles" for each of our states, detailing state policies such as ESL provision, state refugee

offices, and in-state tuition, as well as institutional policies such as English proficiency testing requirements and ESL course offerings. Analysis from these two data sources guided our findings, discussed below.

Results

The Capstone group identified a variety of results that stemmed from the research and data that was conducted. Results varied from institutional and state provisions that impact refugee students, to factors that impact students' aspirations and transitions to higher education.

Policy Results

From the policy research, we found that state and institutional policies greatly shaped refugee experiences in accessing higher education. At the state-level, the resources offered within their state refugee office shaped opportunity accessibility. Specifically, some states provide in-state tuition for refugee students in higher education, while others do not. This presents a large difference in support offered by states. On the institutional side, the variation of ESL classes and English proficiency testing options impacted refugees' HEI experience. Additionally, some institutions provide programming or offices to support refugee students.

State Policies

One of the most visible features of support that states utilize is federally-mandated refugee offices. These offices are either housed within a state government office or designated to private organizations to operate within a public-private partnership. ESL provision varied widely between states, with most states cutting these services off a few weeks after refugees arrived to the country, or when refugees obtained employment. Additionally, states prioritized English provision and higher education opportunities at differing levels, which provides barriers for refugees located in or moving to states on the lower end of that priority threshold.

Institutional Policies

ESL courses were offered in a variety of ways and costs across higher education institutions. We divided our research on this category into two main subsets: cost and credit-bearing status. For cost, we found that courses that were offered for free were generally more accessible (in terms of where and when they were offered) and were offered on a non-credit-bearing basis. Courses provided at a cost were more likely to be credit-bearing, and not every state offered both credit- and non-credit-bearing classes. Financial aid eligibility for ESL classes was a barrier identified for refugee students. Credit- and non-credit-bearing classes had different thresholds for financial aid eligibility. A variety of non-credit-bearing courses were free, but would not provide credit for the student. Credit-bearing courses had higher costs but varied in allowing financial aid to apply to these courses.

Institutions offered a wide variety of English proficiency testing options, from institutions offering one test to offering twelve tests. Most institutions require English proficiency tests for admittance, which points to the relevancy of testing options. English proficiency tests vary from cost to testing avenue, all of which correlate with the strengths and weaknesses of test-takers.

Student Experience Results

From the student interviews, multiple factors provided context to refugee student experiences in higher education. Financial aid and language support were two of the biggest barriers that impacted students in their decision to attend HEIs. Their support systems and career aspirations provided motivation to succeed throughout their collegiate journeys. While on campus, social involvement and responsibility balance were two factors that continued to challenge students.

College Motivations and Decisions

There were multiple factors that were identified to shape refugee students' experience in their transition to college, including financial aid and language support. Students specifically cited that financial aid and lack thereof was one of the biggest barriers they faced in choosing a HEI. The support they received in their early education surrounding their English language support also shaped their decision-making process. One of the biggest motivations for the students to attend HEIs is that the students viewed these institutions as a pathway to their dream job. Balancing financial responsibilities and barriers, as well as embracing their educational potential are all factors that refugee students consider while selecting a HEI.

Sense of Belonging and Reducing Barriers

Students' sense of belonging when arriving on campus is included by factors such as campus involvement and family commitments. Students stated that they wanted to feel included in the social setting of their institutions and sought student organizations and opportunities to get involved within their campus community. Additionally, family commitments included their sense of belonging, as students were sometimes caught between their family and academic obligations. Some students chose to attend an institution closer to home, for example, in order to balance that obligation balance. One factor that helped alleviate this pressure of balancing responsibilities was establishing intentional support systems and relationships throughout their academic and personal lives. PAIR historically provided a large amount of nuanced support, which bolstered the confidence of students to approach and succeed in higher education.

Recommendations

The Capstone group identified six recommendations supporting the development of support for refugee students and advocating for better higher education policies. Recommendations are supported by evidence from the literature reviews and student interviews.

Recommendation 1a, Sense of Belonging & Success:

Reframe the discussion surrounding becoming involved on campus as students tend to see it as an additional responsibility to undertake.

Recommendation 1b, Sense of Belonging & Success:

Advocate for wider accessibility concerning refugee tutoring centers at community colleges and keep refugee students knowledgeable about institutions that do offer these centers. These centers are in line with the current PAIR support model.

Recommendations (continued)

Recommendation 2, Cost of College:

Expand upon workshop curriculum for financial responsibility post-graduation and obtaining scholarships and financial aid. Educate students on financial support provided by various states and institutions to ensure they have the full picture when pursuing higher education.

Recommendation 3, Aspirations & College Decisions:

Educate students on the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in two-year or four-year institutions, especially on the aspects of finances and support offered at each institution type.

Recommendation 4a, Reaching PAIR's Goals:

Gradually move from a one-on-one approach to an overall facilitation approach by creating a resource repository that builds a set of tools that allow students to thrive after PAIR.

Recommendation 4b, Reaching PAIR's Goals:

Keep all potential accessibility features in mind for future implementation and advocacy, as they may be applicable to future classes of PAIR students.

Recommendation 5, English Language Training:

Advocate for extended English language training provided by state offices to support refugees beyond their first few weeks in the country and alleviate financial constraints as refugees navigate a new country. Texas in particular only provides English support for refugees in tandem with employment training.

Recommendation 6, English Proficiency Testing Options:

Advocate for institutions to be more accessible in English proficiency testing options to support refugees in selecting a test that serves their strengths.

Future Work

These results and recommendations can aid PAIR in decision-making for future curriculum and advocacy strategies. While PAIR students identify the tremendous value of the PAIR program, the findings provide a framework for how to support future classes of PAIR students, including how PAIR may adjust programming to support growing numbers of students. The policy recommendations aim to provide a guideline on potential advocacy priorities and ventures at the state level. These findings can also provide a starting point for other refugee-supporting nonprofits and organizations concerning barriers and supports for refugee access to higher education as well as ongoing PAIR evaluation of their higher education programs.

project overview

Refugees in the US experience many barriers when attempting to enter the world of higher education, in order to gain the skills to provide opportunities for themselves and their families. Across the US, different states and individual colleges vary in the services and support features they provide to facilitate refugee enrollment and learning. With this in mind, we explored some of these barriers and supports, specifically as they relate to policies and procedures at the state and institutional levels. We also examined how these potential barriers and supports are reflected in the experiences of refugee students in higher education. The focus of our project was twofold. The first part of the project mapped the policy landscape of 18 states identified. The second part of our project was focused on interviewing refugee students enrolled in PAIR Houston's new college support program to get a better feel for what factors from the policy side actually caused refugee students to experience. With the help of PAIR Houston, we interviewed current and former program participants who participated in their various programs and asked them about their experiences.

Our findings indicated a few exemplar states and schools, which have policies and practices that could be used to create a more welcoming environment for refugee students here in Texas. We also found that many PAIR students, due to their time of arrival, age, and participation in the PAIR program, experience fewer barriers than refugees without these things. Together, these data have informed our recommendations to PAIR about specific policies and how they shape the experiences of both PAIR students and refugees attempting to enter higher education, more generally.



Key Definitions

Refugee:

individuals granted international protection due to their inability or unwillingness to return to their country of origin or nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (Batalova, 2023).

The Refugee Act of 1980:

the Act passed in 1980 defines its purpose as “to provide a permanent and systematic procedure for the admission of refugees of special humanitarian concern to the United States and to provide comprehensive and uniform provisions for the effective resettlement and absorption of those refugees who are admitted” (Library of Congress, 1979).

Community Cultural Wealth:

A framework for identifying and leveraging the cultural assets that students bring from their homes and communities, including aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005).

Resettlement:

the movement of people from one country to a host country, which sometimes results in a movement from one country to a second country before being placed in a host country (The UN Refugee Agency, 2024).

Project Mission

In partnership with PAIR Houston, our team will conduct research regarding refugee higher education experience as well as policies that shape their experience. In doing so, the team will provide PAIR with resources to support program participants' educational potential and policy recommendations.

Client

PAIR Houston is a nonprofit organization that is working to increase refugee access to and success in Houston schools. They recently expanded their program offerings to include college students, which was the program we pulled respondents from when interviewing for student experience.

Advisor

Dr. Ishara Casellas Connors

introduction

Refugee students experience more barriers to accessing higher education institutions than native-born students (Atesok, Komsuoglu, and Ozer, 2019). Admission processes, financial aid, and awareness of resources are all barriers to success and affect access to higher education for refugees in the United States (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). With a steady increase in refugees in Texas (Immigration Research Initiative, 2023), support is needed to aid refugee students in their aspirations for higher education. Literature has found that including refugees in higher education will allow them to contribute to the overall economy by supporting themselves and their families without relying on the state (Kaplan et al., 2021; Loo, 2021; UNHCR, 2016). PAIR Houston empowers refugee youth to navigate American society and reach their academic potential. To assist in fulfilling PAIR Houston's mission, this capstone project considers the barriers faced by students at the state and institutional levels. The completion of this capstone will result in two deliverables for PAIR Houston: a state policy guide and a student support guide. Both deliverables will aid PAIR Houston's mission to make higher education accessible to refugee youth.

To guide this study, we identified two research questions. First, we asked What resources support refugee student access and success in higher education? Second, What is the current state and institutional policy landscape that informs refugees' access to and success in higher education? And under this question, What state and institution-level policies may inform PAIR's future advocacy for improving postsecondary access and success? These questions address the goal of this project considering the barriers that students face at institutions of higher education and how institutions are working to overcome them. Further, they provide information that can help individuals and organizations become refugee policy advocates and help students become advocates for themselves.

Our capstone team examined 18 different states that either had in-state tuition policies in place for refugee students or were identified as a state of interest by the client. This allowed for a wide range of state policies to be explored and examined for best practices.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 students to understand their experiences enrolled in higher education institutions. This sample consisted primarily of members of the Global Ambassadors program and students who had received assistance from PAIR Houston during high school but did not join the Global Ambassadors program. The Global Ambassadors is one of PAIR Houston's newest programs, and it aims to assist students in their first year of college by providing them with advocacy tools they can use after completing the program.

This report will discuss the relevant literature regarding the policies and barriers that shape the experience of refugee students in higher education. Next, we will detail our research methods and the strategies used to structure our research project. Then, we will discuss our results and how the findings in this project reflect the literature used. The report will conclude with recommendations for PAIR Houston and policy stakeholders to increase support for refugee students.

abridged literature review

Overview

A literature review was completed to guide our research design inform our student interview questions and guide our policy research. This review focuses on the main areas of the refugee resettlement experience and the refugee HEI experience. Specifically, the first section regarding the refugee resettlement experience explores how the Refugee Act of 1980 has shaped state ESL provision. The next two sections discuss resettlement barriers, including rapid job placement and familial commitments. Moreover, the first section related to the refugee HEI experience examines the role of HEIs in refugee students' experience. The next section examines challenges in relation to financial aid and in-state tuition. Third, the document degree verification section explores refugees' experiences with document degree verification. Lastly, literature regarding the role of HEIs in refugees' social well-being is discussed.

Refugee Resettlement Experience

State ESL Provision

Refugees, resettlement agencies, policymakers, and employers have all regarded English language proficiency as a top priority in refugees' paths to successful resettlement and autonomy in the US (Kaplan et al., 2021; Koyama, 2015; Noyori-Corbett & Moxley, 2019; Shakya et al., 2010). However, the literature suggests that the guiding framework for the provision of English language learning (ELL), the Refugee Resettlement Act of 1980, is vague and contradictory in its policy objectives (Camps, 2016; Koyama, 2015). The Refugee Resettlement Act of 1980, as well as state and local policies that have developed from it, reaffirms the idea of 'survival English,' or learning English for the sole purpose of acquiring employment, ignoring other benefits of language provision (Camps, 2016). The Act states that resettlement agencies need to "make available sufficient resources" for employment-related training and placement, but in terms of English language provision, agencies must only provide the "opportunity" to learn English to get resettled "as quickly as possible" (Camps, 2016). Therefore, resettlement agencies are incentivized to get refugees to learn English as quickly as possible.

The law's vagueness presents issues regarding the timeframe of ESL acquisition. Koyama (2015) argues that the law's language gives resettlement agencies too much discretion when determining what duration and intensity of ESL constitutes "sufficient". Typically, the duration and intensity levels provided through these policies are much lower than refugees and scholars believe necessary (Kaplan et al., 2021). Because resettlement agencies' main goal is job placement, they typically prioritize refugees they deem "job-ready," or proficient in English, giving non-English speaking refugees less time and attention, rather than funneling their resources toward them (Gonzalez-Benson, 2020). Therefore, refugees are treated like items on an assembly line given that resettlement agencies are incentivized to get them in and out as quickly as possible (Gonzalez-Benson, 2020).

Rapid Job Placement

While self-sufficiency is the stated goal of US resettlement policy, it seems like a counterproductive practice dependent on underfunded private agencies has been fostered by the underlying intent of minimizing refugees' reliance on social services (Koyama, 2015; Gonzales-Benson, 2020; Lukasiewicz et al., 2023). Although ORR-funded support services are available to refugees for a period of five years, the majority of these services are provided during the initial months of their resettlement (Capps et al., 2015; GAO, 2012). The ORR's use of transient performance metrics, such as 90-day job retention and self-sufficiency figures after 120 and 180 days, further reflects this short-term strategy (Digilov & Sharim, 2018). The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report in 2012 recommending a review of these performance measures, stating, "The focus on rapid employment makes it difficult to provide services that may increase refugees' incomes, such as helping them obtain credentials to practice their professions in the United States" (GAO, 2012). However, the HHS has blamed a lack of funding and a sharp rise in the number of new arrivals for their failure to concentrate on long-term objectives (GAO, 2012).

Meanwhile, refugees have suffered long-term consequences as a result of the emphasis on strategies employed to attain quick employment (Digilov & Sharim, 2018). The requirement that ORR-funded language instruction occur concurrently with employment rather than sequentially, forcing refugees to take any available job before learning English, was one of the main effects of this narrow focus (Digilov & Sharim, 2018). Service providers have also "expressed frustration that [ORR] funding does not allow them to prioritize training or skills development programs that might help refugees find higher-skilled and better-paid work in the long term" (Capps et al., 2015).

Familial Commitments

In addition to rapid job placement policies, another important factor to consider is the role family plays in refugee students' education. The needs of refugee families can affect educational aspirations and familial obligations. Since parents have made many sacrifices in migrating, refugee students typically strive to succeed in school (Leo, 2022). Smith (2006) refers to this reciprocal sense of duty as the 'immigrant bargain,' which strongly motivates refugee youth to succeed in school (Leo, 2022), and thus, sets the standard for high aspirations. However, this expectation can at times be contradictory. Despite parents having high educational expectations for their children, the economic challenges faced by the family might require the student to seek a job and contribute to the family income (Leo, 2022).

While attending school, they may be juggling other responsibilities that affect their ability to complete school requirements (CAL, 2022). This can include caring for younger siblings, helping siblings with their homework, or holding jobs to help bring in additional income (CAL, 2022). Depending on the family circumstances, this can also affect whether refugee students finish high school and pursue HE. These responsibilities can trigger emotional trauma from the migration experience and lead to challenges that make it more difficult for students to succeed in school once they have relocated (CAL, 2022).

Language brokering is another unique factor common to refugee families and students. Refugee parents sometimes have limited education in their language and are dependent on their children (Ziaian et al, 2023). Carreon and colleagues (2005) state that immigrant parents often rely on their children as translators especially when it comes to communicating with authority figures such as school administrators. Learning a new language, while seen by refugees as essential, is nonetheless an extremely difficult undertaking (Koyama, 2015). Since parents' ESL training is limited and supplemental to employment, it hinders the parent's ability to support their children's transition to the education system in the US (Li, 2018). In turn, students are often expected to help with language brokering for their parents, which could have an impact on their time spent studying.

Refugee HEI Experience

The Role of HEIs in the Student Experience

Refugees face numerous challenges in the application and admissions processes of higher education, exacerbated by inconsistent state and institutional policies (Arar et al., 2021). Yet, for many refugees, HE remains a pathway to social and economic mobility, as a college degree correlates with increased earnings and enhanced employment prospects (Leo, 2021; Phan, 2018). HE plays a key role in the refugee student experience supporting employment and social well-being as refugees may struggle to find commensurate employment, and are forced to accept low-skill, low-status positions despite possessing a diverse array of expertise, skills, and experiences that can be of worth to their host country societies (Najjar et al., 2018; Teclé et al., 2017). HE offers refugees a path toward obtaining long-term economic self-sufficiency through the acquisition or recuperation of professional credentials (Hoff & Shreet, 2020). However, refugee students express anxiety about the college admissions process and their level of preparedness (Leo, 2021). As a result, community colleges serve as ideal entry points for refugees seeking HE (Phan, 2018), given their open admission policies, welcoming all students irrespective of their academic credentials (Leo, 2021; Phan, 2018; Szelényi & Chang, 2002; Tuliao et al., 2017).

While HE is viewed as a pathway to social and economic mobility, with college degrees correlating with higher wages and improved employment prospects, critics also view it as problematic (Leo, 2021; Phan, 2018). Institutions of HE do more than educate students; they also familiarize refugees with US culture and society (Szelényi & Chang, 2002). However, when curriculum and instruction reflect White normative values and experiences, marginalized learners can have difficulty connecting to the material (MacIsaac et al., 2020). Several strategies for support emerged in the literature as ways to help refugee students both navigate HEIs and adapt socially to their new environments (Block et al., 2018; Dumenden, 2011; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2018). Academic support through the use of tutors has been found to help refugee students navigate complex application and admission processes, while also

strategically planning for their future careers (Dumenden, 2011). Dumenden (2011) closely relates to Yosso (2005) in her recognition of student agency that fuels educational & career aspirations by supporting the skills that they already possess and properly transferring them into a new environment. These tutoring and mentoring relationships have also been found to be mutually beneficial when they are intercultural (Vickers et al., 2017).

Competent practitioner-scholars have different ideas about the ways to improve cultural competency among HE practitioners. Kruse and colleagues (2017) believe that five skills are crucial to cultural competency. These are shared knowledge, professional learning at all levels, inclusive instructional methods, integration with other campus initiatives, and diversity focus (Kruse et al., 2017). Conversely, Murray (2015) believes that professors should be conscious of the pragmatic language they use in the classroom and how it may be understood by non-native English speakers. This cognition opens a path for faculty to have meaningful conversations with their students that lead to an understanding of the way their cultures intertwine and provide students with an opportunity to expand their language skills (Murray, 2015). Lastly, Evans and Unangst (2020) argue that refugee and ESL students should be viewed as clients by HEIs and that doing so should elicit colleges and universities to think critically about the value refugee students bring to campuses in the US.

FAFSA and In-State Tuition

Financial means to pursue postsecondary education are noted as a consistent barrier facing refugees seeking HEI (Hoff & Shreet, 2020; Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Students who are already finding it difficult to support themselves and potentially their families may find it difficult to attend US HEIs due to their high cost (Shakya et al., 2010). The ability to receive Free Application for FAFSA funding and eligibility for in-state tuition are factors that influence a refugee student's decision to enroll in higher education.

Regarding FAFSA funding for refugee students, some of the primary concerns are knowing when and how to apply, being able to apply despite language barriers, and knowing if FAFSA funding will cover all costs. Students whose parents did not attend college in the US may find it difficult to know when and how to apply for college and the FAFSA due to a cultural disadvantage (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Upwardly Global, 2023). Moreover, lack of experience with application systems can cause students to lose out on important funding sources, necessitating out-of-pocket expenses (Evans & Unangst, 2020; Kanno & Varghese, 2010). For many students trying to enroll in HEIs, completing the FAFSA can be difficult, so adding a language barrier to the financial aid application process makes it harder for refugee students to enroll in HEIs (Evans & Unangst, 2020). A final concern that refugee students may have about FAFSA funding is that federal aid may not be sufficient to cover all of their expenses. Although refugees can apply for federal financial aid to assist with college costs, this assistance frequently falls short of what is needed, leaving refugees to foot the bill (Kanno & Varghese, 2010).

Further, refugee students may miss critical application deadlines and scholarship opportunities as a result of their difficulties navigating the university system and its websites (Fricke et al., 2016). Refugee students may encounter language barriers even if they are able to determine when and how to apply, especially if they do not speak English when they first arrive in the US (Ward & Batalova, 2023). This is seen when students are required to apply in either English or Spanish for the FAFSA and other

scholarships, which are not representative of the languages spoken by many refugees in Texas (Evans & Unangst, 2020; Kanno & Varghese, 2010).

Another significant element that affects refugees trying to enroll in HEIs is in-state tuition. Due to the current decentralized system in which the US operates, each state has adopted its own regulations governing who is eligible for in-state tuition. As a result, refugees do not have equal access to HE financing opportunities across the country (Casellas Connors et al., 2023; Loo, 2021; Łukasiewicz et al., 2023). Since it can be challenging for HEIs to classify refugees, one approach is to designate them as international students, which may prevent them from being eligible for in-state tuition (Casellas Connors et al., 2023). In the state of Texas, students are required to show that they have lived there for at least a year (Casellas Connors et al., 2023; Loo, 2021). This can be challenging to do if the student or their family has recently immigrated to the country or has lived in a single home with multiple families, in which case their name may not have been on the lease. Therefore, HEI funding can provide barriers to refugee HE attainment due to barriers in the accessibility of funding streams.

Refugee Institutional ESL Experience

According to the US Department of Education projections, 13% of undergraduate students were non-native English speakers in 2010, and by 2025, 25% of K-12 students will be ESL students (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Given that the cost of attending HE in the US is one of the highest in the world and that ESL students make up a sizable portion of HEI enrollment, academics contend that HEIs should be doing more to support students' English language learning (Evans & Unangst, 2020). Several scholars have contended that these institutions undervalue the prior education and native language proficiency of refugee students (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Ogilvie & Fuller, 2017; Warriner et al., 2019).

According to a study conducted by Kanno and Varghese (2010), refugee students at an HEI reported that their desire to learn in a classroom, participate in programs that could benefit them, and seek out additional support was significantly hampered by the perception that they were not proficient in the English language. Kanno and Varghese (2010) claim that some universities' lack of cultural competency exacerbates the ostracizing culture that exists between English speakers and non-speakers of the language. In their study, the university separated "remedial" classes from general classes for students who were not yet proficient in English in order to avoid causing any delays for the other students (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Additionally, many students reported that their language barriers presented difficulties, such as having to devote less time to their studies and personal growth in order to include language learning for other family members in addition to themselves. Although the students who were interviewed mentioned that these extra challenges required a lot of time and effort to manage, they believed that having a solid understanding of English was essential to applying their prior skills and having a successful life in Canada (Shakya et al., 2010). Therefore, Ogilvie and Fuller (2017) argue for a more holistic approach to ESL pedagogy, including elements of restorative justice and linguistic capital. This could include Warriner and colleagues' (2019) calls for states to allocate funding specifically to multilingual staff and faculty positions.

Document Degree Verification

The absence of documentation is a global issue that makes it especially difficult for refugees to overcome as an educational barrier (Arar et al., 2021; Hoff & Shreet, 2020). Every HEI in the US has a different policy for determining creditworthiness and transferability (Arar et al., 2021; Loo, 2021).

Students may find this problematic as the process of verifying a degree can be expensive and disproportionately impact marginalized groups (Loo, 2021). It can be challenging for first-generation and refugee students to apply to HEIs because each one has different requirements. This is particularly true when those applications call for documentation that refugees do not have or are unable to obtain (Evans & Unangst, 2020). Refugees are frequently required to pay out-of-pocket for document verification, which raises the cost of a college education and decreases their chances of pursuing or finishing a HE degree (Hoff & Shreet, 2020; Loo, 2021). HEIs can offer alternate pathways toward accreditation to help bridge some of the gaps that the government does not cover for refugees. This helps avoid the issue of inadequate documentation and the expenses related to having to pay the difference for verification (Hoff & Shreet, 2020).

Social Well-Being

HEIs also play an important role in the social well-being of refugee students. Social well-being has been defined by dimensions of social integration and acceptance (Keyes, 1998), closely tied to the existence of social connections and networks. McBrien (2005) describes a sense of self and adjustment to new cultural expectations as important aspects of refugee students' psychosocial well-being. When using their social connections, Kingston and Karakas (2022) find that refugee students rely on personal networks to navigate the HE landscape, such as filling out applications and making decisions about which school to attend. These networks can keep refugees connected to their sense of self.

Still, they can also work to their disadvantage, since limited information may be available, and negative experiences can spread among refugee community members (Kingston & Karakas, 2022). In an attempt to adjust to new cultural expectations and build new social connections, refugees find themselves without social capital. Social capital refers to networks that are built through personal and professional relationships (Yosso, 2005). According to Tuliao and colleagues (2017), a lack of language proficiency can inhibit refugees from building these social connections and relationships. Not speaking the language of the host community makes it more difficult for refugees to develop social capital (Camps, 2016). Social well-being as a whole is interconnected with education; it has been found to increase with and allow for broader education opportunities (Keyes, 1998), which makes it important to understand refugee students.

The aforementioned topics of the refugee resettlement experience and the refugee HEI experience guide the scope of work presented throughout this analysis through qualitative and quantitative research findings.

research design

Analysis Overview

To understand the experiences of refugee students navigating higher education and the postsecondary policy landscape, the research is anchored on literature that describes the barriers refugee students face, including personal barriers or the barriers from postsecondary policy implemented by various states. The purpose of this analysis was to draw upon the literature review to address the guiding questions. In order to do this, we used two strands of data. The first were our semi-structured interviews and the second were policy documents.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from the PAIR Houston programs to analyze the experiences of refugee students. Interviews were designed to obtain responses related to the overarching research question, *What resources and services are accessible to refugee students when pursuing higher education?* Transcripts were coded to identify themes present across all the interviews and student support guide.

Policy documents across 18 states were reviewed to develop an understanding of the policy landscapes at both the state and institutional levels in relation to our research question, *How do state and institutional policies impact refugees in the PAIR program in their access to and success in higher education?* In addition to the state level policy, three HEIs were identified in each state, and research surrounded topics such as refugee access to in-state tuition and ESL provision. Subsequently, each state and institutional policy document was coded to examine states according to their support, accessibility, and obstacles pertaining to refugee students pursuing higher education.

Sampling Strategy

Student Experience

Interview participants were primarily selected based on their involvement with PAIR Houston's Global Ambassadors program. All participants had to be connected to PAIR through some avenue to receive information regarding interview opportunities. Additionally, interviewees had to be over the age of 18 and enrolled in college, whether at a two-year or four-year degree-granting institution. In order to recruit participants, a representative from the PAIR office reached out to eligible students with information about the interview opportunity. This purposive sampling was chosen because it allows specific and targeted insight to be gained (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). By exclusively sampling from participants of the PAIR program, the collected data directly represents the population of interest: refugee students associated with PAIR. This approach provides valuable insights into their distinct experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). A total of 19 interviews were conducted, as shown in Table 1 (below). To maintain anonymity, each student was assigned a pseudonym.

	Name*	Age of Arrival	Country of Origin	Type of Higher Education Institution
1	Ruth	15	Democratic Republic of Congo	two year
2	Deven	10	Tanzania	four year
3	August	13	Cuba	two year
4	Tina	11	Eritrea	two year
5	Michael	17	Afghanistan	two year
6	Benedicta	13	Ghana	four year
7	Cassandra	7	Democratic Republic of Congo	four year
8	Ben	17	Ghana	four year
9	Angel	17	Rwanda	two year
10	Mila	16	Eritrea	four year
11	Amina*	11 or 12	Ethiopia	two year
12	Maryam	15	Afghanistan	two year
13	Noah	16	Tanzania	four year
14	Grace	7	Zambia	two year
15	Rachel*	11-13	Uganda	two year
16	Melody	17	Jordan	two year
17	Sarah	12	South	four year
18	Marwa	15	Africa	two year
19	Rose	12	Afghanistan	two year

* indicates students who did not provide a specific age of arrival

State and Higher Education Policy

Purposive sampling provided the best answer to the research questions on how state and institutional policies facilitate refugee accessibility to and success in higher education (Merriam and Tisdelle, 2015). An initial eleven states (California, Colorado, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin) were identified to have in-state tuition policies for refugees, and these eleven states were selected to accompany six additional states of interest (Texas, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee, and Washington) (Creswell and Poth, 2018). An additional state, Idaho, was chosen for its notable immigrant/refugee population given its geographical location, yielding a total of 18 states.

Overall, 54 unique institutions were selected across all 18 states. The specific HEIs used for institutional policy research were selected based on the refugee/immigrant populations in their respective communities. The research team utilized US Census data to identify metropolitan areas with large percentages of foreign-born populations relative to each state (US Census Bureau, 2024). Because a larger proportion of refugees and immigrants typically settled in the chosen cities, it is more likely that HEIs would have refugee-specific policies readily available.

Public two-year institutions were prioritized because the majority of PAIR's program participants attend community colleges. The sampling process for state and institutional policy reviews was designed to maximize the likelihood that the samples held data relevant to prospective refugee students (Merriam and Tisdelle, 2015). Two private institutions were selected due to their unique characteristics in Utah and Colorado. Ensign Community College in Utah is run by a religious institution (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Reserve Inc., 2024). Despite institutions in Utah being unique in their religious affiliation, over half of the 4,000 students are international students, which correlated to a large population center to draw analysis from (Ensign College, n.d.). Colorado College does not require proficiency tests for admission, which was rare among selected institutions (Colorado College, n.d.).

In addition to the private institutions, there were three states that had fewer community college systems, which were Indiana, Vermont, and Utah. To ensure equal representation, 4-year institutions were utilized in these states, with one each in Vermont and Utah, and two in Indiana. The 4-year institutions that were selected were Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), the University of Vermont, Utah Valley University, and Purdue University.

Data Collection and Cleaning

Student Experience

The data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with participants of the PAIR Global Ambassadors program and one former PAIR participant that did not join the program, to gain insight into the experiences of refugee students in higher education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for natural conversation between the interviewer and interviewee, as questions in a semi-structured setting do not typically adhere to a strict format or sequence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Interviews took place both in-person at the PAIR Houston office, and virtually via Zoom. Each interview consisted of twelve questions that covered various aspects of the refugee student experience such as college application processes, financial aid, campus involvement, and available resources. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. The audio recordings of the in-person interviews were typed using Microsoft Word's transcribe feature, while virtual interviews were saved as audio and closed caption files. Following data collection, transcripts were cleaned by cross-referencing with recorded audio to ensure accuracy (Bhattacharya, 2017). Finally, each interview was assigned to another team member to review the cleaned transcripts to verify accuracy, clarity, and consistency (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Policy

The primary data surrounding state policies were pulled from state legislation and administrative code documents accessed through state-hosted databases. Institutional policies were typically accessed via HEI websites. Data collection was facilitated in this way to engage in inductive analysis, which suggests that researchers should collect data, familiarize themselves with the data, and section the data into units of analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017).

State policy documents were examined to identify language pertaining to refugee assistance agencies established under the Refugee Act of 1980, the provision of English language services by these agencies, and the availability of in-state tuition for refugees (Meriam and Tisdelle, 2015; Miles et al., 2019). Within the state policy databases, search terms such as in-state tuition, refugee, ESL, English language training, resettlement services, etc. were used to locate relevant information (Miles et al., 2019; Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Institutional policy documents were primarily examined to identify admission requirements and ESL class availability. Within admission requirements, English proficiency testing options were identified as a topic of high interest. For ESL class availability, data collection surrounded ESL class cost, complexity, and credit-bearing potential. Within institutional websites, search terms such as ESL, English proficiency, and language requirements were used to locate relevant information (Meriam and Tisdelle, 2015). Most institutional websites were dedicated specifically to international students seeking admission, but there were some websites that had pages designated specifically for refugees, immigrants, and undocumented students. Finally, unique support features and barriers at the state and institutional levels were identified.

All collected documents were cataloged and organized by state and further categorized by topic within an online spreadsheet (Miles et al., 2019; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Theme categories included in-state tuition for refugees, state ESL provision, state refugee office, English proficiency requirements, ESL classes (credit- and non-credit-bearing), state support feature, institutional support feature, and barrier (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Afterward, a peer review process was implemented to ensure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of our data collection efforts (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Coding Methods

Student Experience

The semi-structured interview codebook content consisted of questions and topics that were discussed during the first round of semi-structured interviews. The coding team devised conceptual codes, which served as overarching categories to bind key areas of interest (Miles et al., 2019). The conceptual codes were then expanded into descriptive subcodes to provide specificity and draw insights from the narratives shared by the students (Miles et al., 2019). For instance, under the conceptual code of Education, a variety of subcodes were generated, such as high school experience, college major, and prior schooling outside of the US. The initial coding phase consisted of dividing the transcripts between two coders, meticulously reviewing each transcript, and assigning relevant codes. During this process, subcodes such as general support and refugee experience were added to capture significant segments of data introduced by the interviewees.

Policy

The development of the policy codebook was structured around the broad categories of state and institutional policy (Miles et al., 2019). Descriptive codes for state policies were created to reflect the themes of in-state tuition for refugees, refugee service agencies, the services provided by these agencies, and unique support features and barriers at the state level (Miles et al., 2019). Additional codes were developed to further categorize the data into subcategories (Miles et al., 2019). For example, a subcode was used to identify a stated focus on education by refugee service agencies (Miles et al., 2019; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Institutional policy descriptive codes focused on English proficiency requirements for admission and ESL courses offered. Credit- and non-credit-bearing ESL courses were distinguished with separate codes, and subcodes for each unique English proficiency test used by the HEIs were created throughout the coding process. Codes for unique support features and barriers at the institutional level were also created to highlight notable policies. State and institutional policy documents were organized and coded by state, with an initial round of coding being conducted on three states by three coders. The results of the coders' processes were compared to ensure consistent coding methods and identify emerging themes (Bhattacharya, 2017). The three coders then each coded an additional five states to complete the coding.

Data Analysis

Student Experience

Throughout the coding process, inductive analysis was conducted to identify emerging themes and patterns from our data, including resource accessibility, mitigated factors, promoting aspirations, and more in-group discussions (Bhattacharya, 2017). Subcodes and conceptual codes were mapped onto the thematic concepts from the findings (Miles et al., 2019). Themes were consolidated and reorganized using narrative descriptions to outline key takeaways, and then MAXQDA software was utilized to generate a segmented matrix (Miles et al., 2019). This aided in synthesizing and integrating interview data into a cohesive set of findings (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Policy

Emerging themes were identified throughout the policy review coding process as part of early analysis (Miles et al., 2019). Initial themes that were discovered included conditional eligibility for in-state tuition exemptions, significant variance in state refugee agencies' scope of services, and a diverse array of ESL offerings at the institutional level. MAXQDA was utilized to populate a segmented matrix to further guide analysis of how state and institutional policies may impact a prospective refugee student's experience in seeking higher education (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Findings at both the state and institutional levels were compiled by state to inform the evaluation of each state's overall structural impact on refugee access to higher education (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

results

Policy Findings

Refugees' experiences with higher education accessibility and success in the United States are largely shaped by state and institutional policies. In our research at the state level, financial accessibility is supported through refugee-specific in-state tuition exemptions among eleven states in our sample. Additionally, while the Refugee Act of 1980 required each state to establish a state office to preside over the administration of services for refugees, certain state offices appeared to have a more concerted focus on providing support for refugee access to and success in higher education. The availability of ESL training varied greatly at both the state and institutional levels. Some states offered a broad range of opportunities and resources through their refugee support agencies, while others provided only a limited scope of services. ESL classes at each university were particularly diverse in breadth, depth, and accessibility. Free (non-credit) ESL classes for community members were often available, but some universities offered credit-bearing courses tailored specifically for different career fields, albeit at a cost. Additionally, most of these universities had English proficiency requirements for admission into the institution, placement into ESL courses, or both. These requirements may pose a barrier to some prospective refugee students, particularly if the courses they are placed into are costly and/or are ineligible for financial aid.

State Policy

At the state level, we examine several features that contribute to post-secondary accessibility and success for refugee students. Findings regarding each state's refugee office, whether the offices' websites mentioned ESL provision and the availability of in-state tuition for refugees are found in Table 2 below.

State	Refugee Office	Mention of ESL Provision	In-State Tuition
California	The Refugee Resettlement Program under the California Department of Social Services*	Yes - ESL training	Yes - At community colleges only
Colorado	Colorado Refugee Services Program (CRSP) under the Colorado Department of Human Services*	Yes - ESL classes at multiple levels	Yes
Idaho	The Idaho Office for Refugees	Yes - "supports English language training"	No

State	Refugee Office	Mention of ESL Provision	In-State Tuition
Indiana	Indiana Refugee Services	No	No
Iowa	The Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services (BRS)	Yes - "access to ESL classes"	Yes
Kentucky	The Kentucky Office for Refugees (KOR)	Yes - ESL instruction	No
Maine	The Office of Maine Refugee Resettlement Services (OMRS)	Yes - English language training	Yes
Maryland	The Maryland Office for Refugees and Asylees (MORA)	Yes - English language services	No
Minnesota	The Refugee Resettlement Programs Office under the Minnesota Department of Human Services	Yes - language services	Yes
Ohio	Refugee Program Services under the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services	No	Maybe - Refugees eligible for consideration by the Chancellor
Oregon	Office of Immigrant and Refugee Advancement	Yes - English language services	Yes
Tennessee	Tennessee Office for Refugees	Yes - English language instruction	No
Texas	Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs and Texas Office for Refugees	Yes - but not available as a "stand-alone service"	No
Utah	Refugee Services under Utah Workforce Services & the Utah Refugee Health Program under the Utah Department of Health and Human Services	Yes - in Refugee Services through Utah Workforce and in Utah Refugee Health providing "linguistically appropriate" health screenings	Yes

State	Refugee Office	Mention of ESL Provision	In-State Tuition
Vermont	State Refugee Office under the Vermont Agency of Human Services	Yes - English language learning	Yes - Community colleges only
Virginia	Virginia Refugee Resettlement Program under the Virginia Department of Social Services	No	Yes
Washington	The Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (ORIA)	Yes - several	No
Wisconsin	The Bureau of Refugee Programs (BRP)	Yes - English language training	Yes

* refugee office that has stated focus on education

In-state tuition

Given the impact of financial barriers on refugee student representation in HEIs (Hoff & Shreet, 2020; Kanno & Varghese, 2010), the availability of in-state tuition for refugee students offers a potential reprieve, but this varies significantly from state to state (see Table 2). In our review of in-state tuition policies, we did not find any additional states that offered in-state tuition to refugees beyond the eleven we had initially selected for this feature. The other seven states (Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington) had no special provision for refugees to receive in-state tuition, requiring the individuals to fulfill their standard requirements for residency. The states that do offer a refugee-specific provision generally include stipulations regarding the timing of refugees' arrivals to the state in question relative to their arrivals in the United States, as well as their intention to establish or continue their residence within the state. For example, Wisconsin grants resident status for the purpose of tuition to refugees "who moved to this state immediately upon arrival in the United States and who has resided in this state continuously since then...if he or she demonstrates an intent to establish and maintain a permanent home in Wisconsin" according to certain criteria (Wis. Stat. § 36.27, 2024; Wis. Stat. § 38.22, 2024).

Some states had unique features attached to refugees' access to in-state tuition. The policies in California and Vermont only applied their exceptions to refugees attending a state community college (Cal. AB-343, 2017; Vermont State Colleges System, 2021). Interestingly, Utah considers an individual who has "submitted in good faith an application for refugee status" eligible for their policy granting in-state tuition to refugees (Utah R512). Ohio's policy does not directly offer in-state tuition for refugees but allows for the Chancellor of the Ohio Department of Higher Education to consider those classified as political refugees for in-state tuition (Ohio Admin Code Rule 3333-1-10).

State Refugee Office

A key aspect of a state's efforts to support refugees is its federally-mandated refugee office. These offices are typically housed within each state's Department of Human Services or similar agency. However, some private organizations are designated to fulfill this role in states like Idaho, Kentucky, Maine, and Tennessee. Both public and private refugee service offices partner with other organizations to connect refugees with resources.

The Refugee Resettlement Act of 1980 required each state to establish such an office, but we found the scope of each office's services vary. Generally, these offices provide employment-related services to promote refugee self-sufficiency and occasionally limited health services. However, the offices in states like California and Colorado placed a focus on education within their service provision. California's Refugee Resettlement Program specifically listed 58 education resources for refugees across eleven counties on its website (California Department of Social Services, 2024). Meanwhile, the Colorado Refugee Services Program partners with the Emily Griffith Technical College in their CAREERS Program to prepare refugees for employment (Colorado Department of Human Services, 2024).

State ESL Provision

Adjacent to the focus on education, the variance in English language training is also notable (see Table 2). In our review of the state refugee offices, three states (Indiana, Ohio, and Virginia) did not mention ESL provision on their website as one of the services offered by their offices. Furthermore, ESL provision is typically tied to refugee employment services. In our focus state of Texas, for example, ESL must be offered at the same time as other employability services... [and] be provided outside normal working hours" (1 Tex. Admin. Code § 376.602). Unique features found included Kentucky's multicultural and multilingual staff, (Catholic Charities of Louisville, 2024) and Idaho's use of a strengths-based and trauma-informed approach in delivering services through its English Language Center (English Language Center, n.d.).

Other, more comprehensive English language training services were found but were generally restricted to refugees who meet the eligibility criteria for and are using other resources such as TANF and Refugee Cash Assistance. One example of this is in Washington, where several levels of English language training are available via classroom settings, as well as one-on-one or small-group tutoring settings, as part of the state's Limited English Proficiency Pathway program (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, n.d.). General ORR requirements, such as limiting Refugee Resettlement Services to those within 60 months of their eligibility date, were also applicable to many states' ESL provisions.

Institutional Policy

Access to higher education has been shown to be a pathway to a better future, and colleges make it easier or harder to succeed in these institutions based on their policies and procedures for accepting refugees into their programs and enrolling them in classes. Along with the state elements listed above, individual higher education institutions also shape the landscape of refugee access to higher education, specifically in terms of English language learning (Table 2).

Specifically, we consider the level of support provided by each individual institution in terms of English proficiency requirements and options to take ESL courses. Utilizing these community colleges' websites, we looked into whether or not they required English-language proficiency for students whose

first language was not English, how many test options they provided for submitting English proficiency, and if the colleges offered credit-bearing, non-credit-bearing, or both options for ESL classes. These colleges and the programs and services that they choose to offer can act as barriers or supports to refugee entry into and success in the realm of higher education.

Table 3: Institutional				
State	College Name	ESL Proficiency Required?	Number of Proficiency Test Options Available	Credit- and Non-Credit-Bearing Courses?
California	San Diego Community College District (SDCCD)	Yes	1	Non-credit-bearing
	Glendale CC	Yes	5	Both
	Sacramento City College	Yes	4	Credit-bearing
Colorado	CC of Denver	Yes	3	Both
	Colorado College*	No	4	Credit-bearing
	CC of Aurora	Yes	2	Both
Idaho	College of Western Idaho	Yes	3	Non-credit-bearing
	College of Southern Idaho	Yes	3	Both
	North Idaho	Yes	2	Non-credit-bearing
Indiana	College Ivy Tech	Yes	3	Non-credit-bearing
	CC IUPUI*	No	3	Non-credit-bearing
	Purdue University*	Yes	3	Non-credit-bearing

Table 3: Institutional				
State	College Name	ESL Proficiency Required?	Number of Proficiency Test Options Available	Credit- and Non-Credit-Bearing Courses?
Iowa	Des Moines CC	Yes	4	Both
	Kirkwood CC	Yes	4	Both
	Eastern Iowa CC	Yes	2	Both
Kentucky	Jefferson Community and Technical College	Yes	1	Non-credit-bearing
	Bluegrass Community and Technical College	Yes	5	Both
	South Central Kentucky Community and Technical College	Unstated	Unstated	Non-credit-bearing
Maine	Southern Maine CC	Yes	2	Credit-bearing
	York County CC	Yes	2	No information
	Eastern Maine CC	Yes	1	No information
Maryland	Baltimore City CC	Yes	4	Both
	Montgomery College	Yes	4	Both
	Howard CC	Unstated	2	Both
Minnesota	Minneapolis Community and Technical College	Yes	3	Credit-bearing
	Rochester Community and Technical College	No	3	No information
	North Hennepin Community College	Yes	4	Credit-bearing

Table 3: Institutional				
State	College Name	ESL Proficiency Required?	Number of Proficiency Test Options Available	Credit- and Non-Credit-Bearing Courses?
Ohio	Cuyahoga CC	Yes	1	Credit-bearing
	Cincinnati State	Yes	3	Both
	Columbus State CC	No	2	Both
Oregon	Chemeketa CC	No	Unspecified	Both
	Clackamas CC	Yes	2	Non-credit-bearing
	Blue Mountain CC	Yes	1	Both
Tennessee	Nashville State CC	Yes	2	Credit-
	Chattanooga State CC	Yes	1	bearing
	Southwest Tennessee CC	No	3	Credit-
Texas	Houston CC	Yes	5	bearing
	Austin CC	Yes	2	Credit-
	Dallas College	Yes	3	bearing Both
Utah	Salt Lake CC	No	0	Both
	Utah Valley University*	Yes	3	Both
	Ensign College	Yes	4	Credit-bearing
Vermont	CC of Vermont	Yes	4	Both
	Landmark College	Yes	2	Non-credit-bearing
	University of Vermont*	Yes	6	Credit-bearing

Table 3: Institutional				
State	College Name	ESL Proficiency Required?	Number of Proficiency Test Options Available	Credit- and Non-Credit-Bearing Courses?
Virginia	Tidewater CC	Yes	2	Credit-bearing
	Northern Virginia CC	Yes	4	Both
	Patrick & Henry CC	Yes	4	Credit-bearing
Washington	Seattle College	Yes	10	Both
	Community Colleges of Spokane	Yes	12	Both
	Tacoma CC	No	6	Both
Wisconsin	Milwaukee Area Technical College	Yes	2	Non-credit-bearing
	Madison Area Technical College	Yes	7	Non-credit-bearing
	Northeast Wisconsin Technical College	Yes	4	Both

* four-year colleges were utilized in states that did not have three community colleges

English Proficiency

At a majority of the institutions, applicants are required to take an English proficiency test for admission into college, with more than half of the colleges surveyed offering three or fewer testing options, and only five offering six or more options (see Table 3). Most of the colleges provide several test options, the most common being the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Many colleges offer several other proficiency testing options, such as the Duolingo English Test (DET), ESL Accuplacer, Michigan English Test (MET), ACT and SAT scores, and the Pearson PTE. Colleges in Washington by far had the most options for English proficiency testing options, with the Community Colleges of Spokane offering 12 different testing options for proving English proficiency (Community College of Spokane, n.d.a). However, colleges in a few of the states had no requirements or options for an English proficiency test. For example, Colorado College has a “test-optional policy,” but applicants are strongly encouraged to submit their English proficiency scores for course placement purposes (Colorado College, n.d.b).

Moreover, Chemeketa Community College in Oregon has no requirements for English proficiency (Chemeketa Community College, n.d.). Similarly, Tacoma Community College in Washington and Salt Lake Community College in Utah do not require English proficiency for admission; instead, the tests can be used for course placement (SLCC, 2017c; Tacoma Community College, n.d.). Lastly, a few of the colleges have school-specific English proficiency tests or programs for course placement, including Sacramento Community College in California, Howard Community College in Maryland, South Central Kentucky Community and Technical College, and Kirkwood Community College in Iowa (Howard Community College, n.d.; Kirkwood Community College, 2024; Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical College, n.d.)

Exceptions to English Proficiency

Colleges in many of the states we examined contain exceptions to waive English proficiency exams; however, the three institutions in both Idaho and Maryland have no exceptions. The most prominent exceptions that exist amongst the colleges include a score of 19 or higher on the English portion of the ACT and a score ranging from 430-450 or higher on the English section of the SAT, the successful completion of English coursework from an accredited college or university with a grade of C or better, and graduating from high school in the US with passing English grades. Moreover, a notable exception across the colleges in Texas, Milwaukee Area Technical College in Wisconsin, and Ivy Technical Community College in Indiana is that these institutions exempt English proficiency requirements from countries identified as English-speaking (i.e. American Samoa, Anguilla, Australia, Barbados, and several others) (Austin Community College District, 2023; Dallas College, n.d.; Milwaukee Area Technical College, 2024). As mentioned in the previous section, Colorado College, Tacoma Community College in Washington and Salt Lake Community College in Utah do not require English proficiency for admission; instead, the tests can be used for course placement (Colorado College, 2023; Tacoma Community College, n.d.; SLCC, 2017c).

ESL Instruction Offerings

Most of the institutions we looked at offered ESL courses, with the exception of York County Community College in Maine, Eastern Maine Community College, Landmark College in Vermont, and Rochester Community and Technical College in Minnesota, as these colleges' websites offered no information on ESL provision. In our analysis of the 50 remaining colleges, 25 colleges offered both credit- and non-credit-bearing ESL classes, 13 offered only credit-bearing classes, and 12 offered only non-credit-bearing classes. We found that non-credit-bearing ESL classes are typically free of charge and offered on flexible schedules with multiple formats available (in-person, online, self-taught) and more options for weekends and evenings while credit-bearing classes generally cost the same as other courses. However, Columbus State Community College in Ohio offers non-credit-bearing courses that range from \$100-\$190 (Columbus State Community College, n.d.). For colleges that organized their ESL class offerings into levels, typically lower levels (lower English proficiency) were non-credit-bearing while higher levels were credit-bearing. In Tennessee, Nashville State Community College mentions that financial aid covers unlimited credit-bearing ESOL classes if students qualify (Nashville State Community College, n.d.). For colleges that offered both credit and non-credit ESL classes, sometimes

the non-credit classes were used (or in some cases, required) as a jumping-off point to get students prepared for credit-bearing ESL classes. A majority of the states contain colleges that provide both credit and non-credit ESL programs with several options ranging from beginner to advanced courses. Of the 18 states surveyed, 15 had at least one college that offered both credit- and non-credit-bearing courses, with the exceptions being Minnesota, Tennessee, and Utah (see Table 3). Baltimore City Community College in Maryland has the option of enrolling in beginner ESL courses and regular courses concurrently (Baltimore Community College, 2024). Moreover, the College of Southern Idaho provides free ESL classes that are job-focused, and Glendale Community College in California offers free, non-credit-bearing courses that assist students with citizenship and job training (College of Southern Idaho, 2024; Glendale Community College, n.d.)

Complementary Programs & Practices

Several of the institutions across the examined states offer support for refugee students. There are a few institutions that offer a physical location/program for refugee students to seek assistance for information relating to their course options, financial aid, language assistance, and more. For example, Aurora Community College in Colorado has a Cultural Center, which offers special programming for refugees with vocationally-focused English language instruction and assessment, scholarship opportunities to facilitate successful integration, a supportive learning environment, and intercultural competence (Community College of Aurora, 2023). Colorado College has a Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CLD) specialist who teaches ESL courses and offers one-on-one support for students (Colorado College, n.d.). Similarly, in Maryland, Montgomery College has a Refugee Training Center, Howard Community College contains an English Language Center, and Baltimore City Community College offers a Refugee Assistance Program (Montgomery College, n.d.; Howard Community College, n.d.; Baltimore City Community College, 2024). Montgomery College also offers a Global Business English Program with instructors who are ESL specialists in order to assist students with developing their English skills and cultural competencies (Montgomery College, n.d.). Some of the tutoring centers or refugee-serving offices across institutions also offered designated staff to assist refugee students, which increases the likelihood of refugee students reaching out for assistance. Montgomery College, Aurora Community College, and Colorado College all provided contact information for specific representatives for refugee students to reach out to (Montgomery College, n.d.; Community College of Aurora, 2023; Colorado College, n.d.). These contacts could be staff who work specifically in ESL programs, tutors who specialize in ESL classes, or other staff who are employed within refugee/tutoring centers.

There were other institutions that offered unique course placement and degree verification support for refugee students. For example, Sacramento Community College in California offers both English and Math automatic placement if a student graduated from a high school in the US in the last 10 years (Sacramento Community College, n.d.). Students at Glendale Community College can simultaneously take credit and non-credit-bearing ESL courses (Glendale Community College, n.d.) Blue Mountain Community College in Oregon includes free tutoring services and student support (BMCC, 2016) and York County Community College in Maine works to accommodate students who cannot obtain the necessary documentation for admission. Moreover, Aurora Community College in Colorado allows

students to complete a self-assessment documenting their experience and comfortability with English and math to determine course placement (Community College of Aurora, n.d.). Applicants are also offered free resources to study for the Accuplacer at Eastern Maine Community College (EMCC, 2024). Vermont's Landmark College has a program called STEP, which is designed to increase college readiness by building skills like reading comprehension, writing, and academic habits (Landmark College, 2024a). Landmark College also gives refugee students access to special tutoring support related to their classes (Landmark College, 2024b). Spokane Community College in Washington also has a tutoring center for refugee students for computer and printer use, help with computer navigation, identifying online tutoring resources, and writing/math assistance (Spokane Community College, n.d.).

Another support that institutions implement is the option to translate their admission websites into multiple languages. Offering translation services that are embedded into websites cuts out a barrier for refugee students (and their families) to take the information from a website in English to a third-party translation service. The websites for Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana and Milwaukee Technical College in Wisconsin offer several language options to accommodate non-native English-speaking students (Ivy Tech Community College, n.d.; Milwaukee Area Technical College, n.d.). Vermont even went so far as to offer the FAFSA website in multiple languages with the click of one button (VSAC, 2024), which takes a huge weight off of refugee students' shoulders, as long as their language of choice is included in that list.

Student Experience Findings

State and institutional policies significantly influence the experiences of refugee students in higher education. Their transition to college is shaped by various factors, including financial aid and language support. Our data reveals that students' sense of belonging is influenced by factors such as campus involvement and family commitments. Establishing intentional supportive relationships through connections and engagement with the campus community plays a pivotal role in bolstering students' sense of belonging. Interviews with students indicate that a common motivation for pursuing higher education is to attain their dream job. Factors influencing their decision to choose an institution include proximity to home, familial responsibilities, and financial considerations. Moreover, to address these barriers, students have found significant support from PAIR Houston, which intervenes throughout the application process and provides ongoing assistance to students after enrollment. They have also found support through other non-PAIR agents underscoring the significance of human capital and connection in the higher education setting.

Sense of Belonging: Connections and Missed Connections

Interviews with students revealed a strong sense of determination and optimism among PAIR participants. Many students exhibited a sense of belonging and were actively engaged in school activities, both of which enhanced their positive perception of higher education. In discussions about this topic, students pointed out that two main factors contribute to their sense of belonging: the people around them and their faith. Most students expressed that the individuals at their respective

institutions created a welcoming atmosphere for them. As Angel, who attends a two-year institution, noted “The people help me to feel welcome. The classmates, even the professors, they help me.” For her part, when reflecting on her four-year institution, Sarah shared similar feelings, stating, “I feel welcomed and people you know actually try their best to you know, make sure that you’re involved, and you know, try to get to know you. So that’s something that makes me feel welcome.” While Angel and Sarah attend different institutions, they both experienced a welcoming environment that allowed them to foster a sense of belonging. Policy analysis illustrated institutional physical locations, like Aurora Community College in Colorado which has a Cultural Center that offers special programming for refugees, which may be supporting students to build a sense of belonging.

The second most mentioned factor that aided in fostering a sense of belonging was a shared faith or religion. Benedicta, as well as a few others, marked religion as their foundation for sense of belonging, stating that at her four-year institution,

What makes me feel welcome is because I'm a Christian, and it's a Christian school ... I feel welcome [be]it's diverse, too. So like they have, they have other black students and other people from different countries, so I don't feel like pressured, or me wanting to be fit in. I just be myself, cause there are other people that [are] just like me. Like I feel really comfortable there.

Finding people who are just like her allowed Benedicta to feel comfortable at her institution and build a network of support. For Benedicta and her peers, establishing connections with people at their institution and seeing their values reflected, as well as a diverse student population, contributed to fostering a sense of belonging that positively impacted their experience in college.

Additionally, this increased sense of belonging paved the way for active student involvement. Deven is a student-athlete at a four-year institution, “I play soccer for the college...it’s club soccer.” When asked if playing soccer helped him feel connected with the campus, Deven agreed. Despite low attendance at his games, his family shows their support, and having his family participate in his collegiate activities aided in Deven’s sense of belonging, stating “It gives me confidence.” Alternatively, most students expressed a desire to acclimate to college first, and once they feel more comfortable, they plan to get more involved on campus. Mila prioritized solidifying a strong academic foundation before participating in extracurricular activities. Even though she is not involved at her four-year institution, she understands the value of school involvement since “extracurriculars really help [students], meet new people like in general get out of your comfort zone and really help us.” Benedicta exemplifies this sentiment, emphasizing her need to “figure out how to manage [her] time first” to ensure extracurricular activities don't negatively impact her academic performance.

However, for some students, a sense of belonging was challenging to identify. A few expressed feelings of otherness or a lack of confidence. Most, though, had no time to realize what a sense of belonging meant or how it felt. Their various other responsibilities, including caring for family, working, or acting as translators, took priority. Of the 19 students interviewed, 63% of them held a job during their first year of college, thus reducing their time to foster relationships on campus and dampening their sense of belonging. A recurring theme among those interviewed was their strong sense of responsibility towards

their family. Despite their young age, many of them were fulfilling familial duties such as translating, driving others, or taking care of younger siblings. Grace, especially, took on this duty with maternal ownership. She expressed, "I take care of my kids. I mean, not my kids...I spend too much time with them. I feel like they're even my kids, my little siblings." Grace referring to her siblings as "my kids" demonstrates the level of responsibility some refugee students feel regarding their families. Despite being enrolled at a two-year institution, Grace had more responsibilities than the average student. Similarly, Marwa, who is also attending a two-year school, found herself with a myriad of responsibilities. She juggled online classes, assisted her siblings, held a job, and served as the translator for her parents. As shown in her comment, "I just worked weekends, and then college, homework, and some other stuff that I help with my parents. Like my parents didn't speak English. So I have to do everything...all my siblings that [are] younger than me, I have to take care of them." Taking care of her family occupies a lot of Marwa's time, leaving no room for extracurricular activities at her campus college.

At times, juggling their various roles brings added difficulties. Mila struggled with being a full-time university student and working. When asked if balancing her responsibilities was difficult, she said, "Yes, very much...especially the last two, three months of the job that I did was overnight. So it was very difficult to focus on school, but you gotta do what you can. But it did really affect me. All my studies and stuff." In conversation, Mila mentioned she had quit the overnight job and would take it as a lesson learned for at the core of every student's journey lies a deep need for connection and acceptance. With 63% of the students interviewed having held a job while pursuing their studies, the tenacity with which they approach their college aspirations is palpable. Through their discussions surrounding participation in school activities, familial obligations, and other responsibilities, the PAIR students demonstrate a strong sense of determination and a sense of belonging, even if at first they were unfamiliar with the term.

College Motivations

Several factors influence a student's decision to attend a higher education institution. These commonly include being the first in their family to attend college, viewing higher education as a natural progression in their learning journey, recognizing the significance of this opportunity upon entering the US, and striving to make their parents proud. For example, Grace, a student who arrived at the age of 7 said "[She attended college] because no one in my family has ever attended college. I was going to be the one to go there [college], even whether I liked it or not. I was the firstborn." Another student, Maryam who arrived at age 15, stated she attended because she was "the first person in my family who is going to college." Some students indicated an interest in pursuing higher education as a means of furthering their academic journey and unlocking future opportunities. Amina shared, "Instead of staying home and wasting time - Why not do something that I like and have more education so that I can have more knowledge." Echoing Amina, Mila said, "As an immigrant, the reason why we came here is to get the opportunity, get the education that we couldn't get, and improve that to get a job. I feel like I do not have a choice [in attending college]." Similarly, Tina who arrived at age 11, explained, "In the African communities school is like the number one thing for them. So I just want to make my parents proud."

Despite different motivating factors regarding attending college, the primary focus for most, if not all, interviewees is completing their degree, which they see as the key to achieving their dream job. Most students express a commitment to careers involving service to others, particularly in social work and healthcare fields. Amina articulates her aspiration to return to her homeland and provide essential resources, resembling a social worker, stating, "I really want to give back to my community." Many students envision using their chosen careers to contribute to the well-being of others, regardless of the specific field. For example, Angel cites a preference for physical therapy, driven by a desire to assist others. August acknowledges the economic disparities, expressing a desire to become a dentist to help those less financially privileged. Notably, 68% of the interviewed students aspire to future careers in health and human services, with roles such as surgeon, pediatrician, doctor, nurse, physical therapist, and social worker being prevalent among participants and a main motivation in their pursuit of higher education.

College Decisions

Regardless of the initial factors that influenced students' decisions to attend higher education, they each had distinct considerations when choosing a specific higher education institution to attend. Some factors students described included ESL access, cost, and proximity to home/familial obligations. Many students who expressed that ESL course requirements and financial costs were their priority also indicated that they wanted to attend a four-year institution after their two-year institution. Ruth, who is enrolled at a two-year institution, shared, "Let me take those prerequisite classes at community college for a lower cost, and then maybe I will save the money to live on [a university] campus through my last two years." Michael, who arrived at 17, explained that he chose to go to a two-year college, "Because I could take ESL classes and then move on to college-level classes." Ruth expressed the same sentiment, "I had a lot of ESL classes and I got a lot of advice from the advisors/PAIR to do." These interviews with students indicated that the ability to pay for ESL classes was one of the largest contributing factors to their institution decision, and whether higher education was accessible to them.

Cost was an important element of students' decision-making. For example, Mila, whose age of arrival was 16, explained that initially, she planned to attend a local community college, "I do plan to go to HCC (Houston Community College), because in HCC, the FAFSA can afford it, it is cheaper than the universities." After receiving a scholarship to a four-year institution though, she changed her decision, "Once I got this scholarship, I was like, I think I'm good to go to UH (University of Houston). So that's how I went there." Given the role of cost, students pointed to the helpfulness of scholarships in improving their ability to attend higher education institutions. Students like Benedicta and Ruth went to financial aid offices to ask questions about scholarships and refunds while students like Ben were able to qualify for departmental scholarships based on academic merit. Yet, This is also an area in which, when asked, students expressed their desire for additional support and guidance. In the absence of financial aid and clarity regarding requirements and processes, students often felt confused and overwhelmed. When Ben received his financial aid, he wasn't told "anything about requirements or how to maintain the scholarship". In his case, he needed to maintain a certain GPA or his education funding would be pulled. Similarly, Cassandra hoped for "something to be able to track [her] financial aid" to

make the management of her scholarship easier. Other students like Ruth reflect and wish they knew more about the cost of universities before applying. Her experience made her feel as though she wasted her time applying to schools she could not afford.

Students also shared that their HEI choice depended on their familial obligations. One student, Ruth, explained how she chose her college:

It was the closest campus, you know, to where I live. I mean, I have other things I have to do at home, so I chose to [be] closest...I have to take my siblings to school as well and pick them up and drop them off. So when I have to look for classes to sign up, I have to look at the ones that are not going to [interfere with sibling care].

Benedicta shared that, "I didn't want to be out of state. Since my mom just got here and my dad also needs some help around the house...so [I] want to be around here, so [I] can help him." Another student, August, who arrived at 13, said "She [her mother] works overnight and I just didn't think about it. I realized I'm not going to leave my mother alone by herself with my little sister. I need to help her." August, like most of the students interviewed, based his college decisions on influential factors that impacted his family and the role he fulfills within it. The majority of students interviewed experienced strong familial obligations that redirected them to institutions closer to home, which sometimes resulted in them shifting their career aspirations.

Reducing Barriers

PAIR Support

The refugee students found great support and resources through PAIR Houston. PAIR supported students in their educational journeys in a variety of ways from hosting workshops to helping with applications to providing mentors which aided in reducing barriers to successfully enrolling and succeeding in higher education. Most frequently, PAIR's students reference the help they received with filling out the paperwork and forms needed when applying for college. In describing his experience applying to college, Michael, who arrived in Houston when he was 17, noted:

Everything was challenging at that time, but like I said, most of the paperwork PAIR and [my mentor] helped me with it. She always said this is how it works. She sat down with me and did that with every application that I had.

This response highlights the level of detail and patience expressed by PAIR staff in helping students with even mundane necessities such as paperwork. Other students shared similar sentiments. Angel, a refugee student who also arrived at the age of 17, shared the help she received from PAIR in order to obtain a scholarship. PAIR reached out to her saying "We have the scholarship that's available. If you got time, come here. We should help you to apply." PAIR was able to connect Angel and other students with resources such as scholarships that they would have not known about otherwise, helping to alleviate the heavy load associated with higher education applications.

Outside of paperwork, students also mentioned PAIR staff's ability to answer all of their questions, give them advice, and provide important reminders for busy college students. Ben exclaimed about the helpfulness of PAIR's reminders saying "I have so much in my mind that sometimes I completely forget

about everything, but they keep me updated.” As college students like Ben juggle the stressors of school and other priorities, it is easy for some things to fall through the cracks. PAIR provides support through reminders and workshops that minimize these occurrences. Rachel, who came to Houston in middle school, mentioned a variety of topics in which PAIR gave her advice in the form of college preparation workshops:

We got a lot of advice from the PAIR program. They helped us... to balance and to manage our budgets when it comes to college... They show us how we can spend the money, how we can save us from getting a loan.

Students found these workshops helpful as they addressed common college topics. Other than the formal workshop settings, students such as Cassandra always felt comfortable reaching out to PAIR staff directly as questions and concerns arose. Reflecting on her experiences, Cassandra said, “If I had any questions, PAIR was always there for me...I just called...somebody at PAIR like Miss Lauren [and asked] ‘what is this? I don't know what they're talking about!’.” PAIR participants were not afraid to ask questions and felt confident that PAIR staff could provide them with helpful solutions and make them feel more at ease. Each student’s experience highlights the importance of having a support system in which they are able to ask questions as they arise and are also given support they didn’t even know they needed based on professional expertise.

Students felt comfortable working with PAIR staff, asking questions, and seeking guidance because they built close relationships with their PAIR mentors. Most commonly when PAIR’s support was mentioned, students referenced the use of mentors or their specific mentors by name such as Marwa referencing help she received from “Miss Maddie ” or “Miss Lauren ”. While these mentors served as vehicles for refugee students to ask questions, based on student experiences, these relationships became more personal and meaningful over time. When describing her mentor, Mila talked about how she received both advice about college and her personal life which left her feeling as though “they are just like my personal friend at this point”. Benedicta went as far as to say “they are always like my go-to, apart from my family, they are always my go-to”. These connections and relationships persisted even as refugee students moved away for college. Sarah was “glad [PAIR] really actually stayed in contact with, like, the college students in PAIR because it's like the help doesn't stop”. Through these consistent, helpful interactions, mentors became friends and trusted supporters who formed meaningful connections with students elevating their experiences and helping to reduce barriers.

Non-PAIR Support

While refugee college students received substantial support from PAIR Houston, they also received various forms of support from alternative sources which aided their success in higher education. Most commonly, students received help from their high school counselors and teachers when applying to and preparing for college. Mila, a refugee student who arrived at the age 16, noted specifically how her college counselors provided support during her application process saying:

They were helping me with everything they could. I was asking questions. I said I was new to the country and I did not know how to apply to colleges or how to do anything. They... show[ed] me how the application is done and how to apply for FAFSA.

While PAIR helped students with things such as FAFSA applications, these refugee students received

complimentary support within their high schools as well. Students also noted that particular high school teachers helped them academically prepare for college through more rigorous coursework and test preparation. Benedicta expressed how she did not find college courses as challenging because she had been prepared in advance during high school expressing “I kind of knew a little bit before I went [to college]”. Cassandra, who arrived in Houston at the young age of 7, had teachers who conducted “test prep for each section of the SATs” which she found helpful. This academic preparation provided in high school left students feeling more prepared to move into higher education. These individual actors served in similar roles as PAIR mentors to provide guidance and help students best prepare for college.

Once arriving at college and throughout their academic careers, refugee students reported receiving additional support from professors, advisors, and tutors. Advisors provided general college guidance while professors further explained course content. Mila found that advisors were “available any time to answer whatever your question is” and Ben’s professors, particularly his math teacher, were able to “walk [him] through everything so that the next class [he] will be ready”. Professors played a pivotal role in student success in regards to their coursework providing additional help outside of class time. Multiple students also referenced tutors and tutoring centers as vital resources to their success in their education. Benedicta exclaimed that “If it wasn't for my tutoring center, I would probably fail my microbiology class”. Institutional support is common across the nation; for example, Blue Mountain Community College in Oregon includes free tutoring services and student support. Furthermore, some students like Rachel, a refugee who arrived to Houston in middle school, even felt that the college application process and the overall first-year experience were much easier than anticipated due to the high level of support they received: “Honestly, it was not hard for me because I was surrounded with a lot of support members...I did not struggle”. Students generally felt supported by their professors which was complemented by tutors allowing them to be successful in the classroom. These experiences emphasize the importance of well-rounded support from colleges and universities in improving experiences and outcomes for refugee students.

Social support from peer mentors, friends, and family was found helpful by a variety of refugee students who were interviewed. The relationships formed between refugee students and their mentors as well as friends and family members acted as informal networks for information sharing. Ben found the availability of peer mentors through a community organization helpful as they talked about how school was going and checked in with each other weekly. Refugee students with older siblings who have already been to college reported leaning on these relationships for guidance throughout their application process. Amina’s older sister who had already graduated acted as a sounding board: “ I would ask her to help me [because] she had done it before... I would ask her a question about everything that I didn't know”. Additionally, support from friends was found to provide more than guidance. Mila found comfort in the friends she made through her church: “Every time I stress out, I'll always go to church...there's a lot of friends over there and we just chat with them.” Social support, which can come in a variety of forms, help students feel supported in their college careers and build a stronger sense of belonging creating the opportunity for more positive outcomes. In conclusion, refugee students, outside of the PAIR program, primarily found support through counselors and advisors, teachers and professors as well as mentors and friends highlighting the importance of human capital and connection in the higher education experience.

discussion

Policy

State Offices and ESL Provision

The results indicate that each state established a state office in accordance with the Refugee Act of 1980; however, certain state offices were more focused on providing support for refugee access to and success in higher education. This resulted in the availability of ESL provision varying at the state and institutional levels. This is consistent with scholarly findings, as the literature indicates that the Refugee Resettlement Act of 1980 is ambiguous and inconsistent in its policy goals regarding ESL policy (Camps, 2016; Koyama, 2015). Additionally, ESL proficiency has been deemed a top priority in successful refugee resettlement and autonomy (Kaplan et al., 2021; Koyama, 2015; Noyori-Corbett & Moxley, 2019; Shakya et al., 2010).

Seven of the 18 states that we selected (Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington) had no special provision for refugees to receive in-state tuition which requires the students to fulfill standard requirements for residency. As documented in the literature (Hoff & Shreet, 2020; Kanno & Varghese, 2010), refugee students are often underrepresented in HEIs when compared to their native-born peers. Fifteen states had some mention of ESL provision in their refugee office leaving Indiana, Ohio, and Virginia as the three states that did not. Although the US is the world's largest resettlement country, policy regarding the provision of ESL is minimal and inconsistent (Camps, 2016). However, states such as Texas and Wisconsin focus on ESL provision in their refugee offices so that refugees would be self-sufficient (Tex. Admin. Code § 376.602; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.). Digilov and Sharim (2018) note that focusing on self-sufficiency can result in refugees suffering long-term consequences such as minimized aid. Self-sufficiency may be the stated goal of US resettlement policy but it could be seen as a counterproductive practice that undermines the necessity of social services for refugees (Koyama, 2015; Gonzales-Benson, 2020; Lukasiewicz et al., 2023).

Alternatively, other states such as California and Colorado focus on ESL provision to culturally support refugees (California Department of Social Services, 2024; Colorado Department of Human Services, 2024). Providing culturally supportive services can shift resettlement perspectives away from a deficit perspective according to Taylor and Sidhu (2012). Pushing against the tendency of state and local policies that reaffirm the idea of learning English for the sole purpose of obtaining employment (Camps, 2016) and instead focusing on culturally inclusive practices can respect the unique backgrounds of refugees and provide better atmospheres for growth (Felix, 2020). Overall, each state had a refugee resettlement office but the provision of ESL services varied by state with some states focusing on inclusive practices while others focused on self-sufficiency.

FAFSA and In-State Tuition

Of the 18 states that we selected, 7 did not offer a special provision for refugees to receive in-state tuition for refugees (Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington). This could be detrimental to refugee student enrollment in these states given that many refugee students lack the financial resources to pursue post-secondary education (Hoff & Shreet, 2020; Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Refugee students may apply for federal financial aid such as FAFSA but this assistance may not cover

all of their expenses (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Therefore, denying refugee students access to in-state tuition will cause them to pay the bill out of pocket making their HE inaccessible (Kanno & Varghese, 2010).

Vermont provides support in its FAFSA home page being translated into multiple languages (Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, 2024). This support eliminates barriers for refugees associated with FAFSA given that knowledge related to the FAFSA application is a stressor for refugees entering higher education (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Upwardly Global, 2023). Translating the FAFSA home page can potentially eliminate cultural disadvantages by making the information accessible (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Upwardly Global, 2023). Students are often required to apply for the FAFSA in either English or Spanish which may not be representative of all languages spoken by refugees (Evans & Unangst, 2020; Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Taking away this barrier could be beneficial for refugee students (Evans & Unangst, 2020).

Furthermore, states that do offer a refugee-specific provision typically include stipulations on the timing of the refugees' arrival to the state relative to their arrivals in the US as well as intention to continue or establish residence within the state. This can be seen in Texas which requires students to show that they lived in the state for a year to receive in-state tuition (Casellas Connors et al., 2023). Such provisions can hinder HE access for refugee students given that refugee students already face financial difficulties such as potentially having familial obligations (Leo, 2022). Our findings demonstrate that each state will determine the provisions of in-state tuition for refugee students which can result in unequal access to higher education (Casellas Connors et al., 2023; Loo, 2021; Łukasiewicz et al., 2023).

The findings of the interviews complement the policy analysis and emphasize the numerous challenges encountered by refugee students in the application, admission, and transition process in higher education. Aspects of the admissions process, such as financial aid, essay writing, and application materials enhance students' anxiety while hindering success throughout the application process for many refugees. However, the attainment of a higher education degree remains a pathway to social and economic mobility, as a college degree correlates with increased earnings and enhanced employment prospects (Leo, 2021; Phan, 2018). With these juxtaposing themes, students remain concerned over their preparedness for opportunities to seek an advanced education. As such, community colleges serve as ideal entry points for refugees seeking higher education due to open admissions policies and adaptive classes to varying levels of academic preparedness (Phan, 2018).

Institutional ESL Proficiency and Provision

Of the 54 community colleges researched, we found that eight of these institutions do not require non-native English speakers to prove their proficiency. Instead, some of these colleges offer ESL proficiency tests for course placement. Studies have shown that although language barriers present difficulties for refugee students, they believe that language proficiency is essential for building a prosperous life in the US (Shakya et al., 2010). Remedial classes may sometimes act as an alienating factor for students by separating them from their general classes to not slow down the other students (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Students may deem themselves as slow or inadequate learners due to this practice and even possibly see themselves as outsiders due to their language abilities (Kanno & Varghese, 2010).

As such, our findings indicate that 29 institutions offer both credit- and non-credit-bearing ESL classes; 13 offer credit-bearing classes, and 9 offer only non-credit-bearing classes. Our research found that non-credit-bearing classes are typically free and are offered on the weekends and in the evenings with multiple formats available (in-person, online, self-taught) while credit-bearing classes generally cost the same as regular courses. This could be beneficial for refugee students by reducing financial barriers associated with taking ESL courses (Kanno & Varghese, 2010).

For colleges that offered both credit and non-credit ESL classes, sometimes the non-credit classes were used (or in some cases, required) to prepare students for credit-bearing ESL classes. For colleges that organized their ESL class offerings into levels, typically lower levels (lower English proficiency) were non-credit-bearing while higher levels were credit-bearing. Additionally, there was a vast range in what schools provided by way of non-credit-bearing classes and ESL support offered to students. Such course offerings may help prepare students without using a deficit-based approach thus uplifting the students (Hoff & Shreet, 2020; Najjar et al., 2018; Teclé et al., 2017). Lastly, while we did not code for the price of testing options, some colleges did offer test access codes to allow students to access tests free of charge, which can help reduce financial costs associated with the tests (Hoff & Shreet, 2020; Loo, 2021).

Institutional Support

In order to assist refugee students in navigating HEIs, a number of support strategies have been identified in the literature (Block et al., 2018; Dumenden, 2011; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2018). According to research, refugee students who receive academic support through tutoring are better able to navigate the challenging admissions and application processes and make strategic career plans (Dumenden, 2011). Our results suggest that there are a few institutions that offer programs and/or offices for refugee students to seek assistance related to financial aid, course options, language assistance, and more. Further, a few of the colleges have the option to translate their admission websites into several languages. Some of the community colleges provided students with access to extra English language support such as ESL workshops and office hours, support groups, and resource pages for additional community support, as well as designated support staff. Providing navigational support along with a sense of community can benefit refugee students and mitigate barriers while creating a sense of belonging (Upwardly Global, 2023). These institutions actively work to mitigate obstacles for refugee students (Hoff & Shreet, 2020).

Student Experience

Impact of Financial Aid on Enrollment

As observed through the conducted interviews, refugee students emphasize the cost of higher education as an obstacle to navigate when faced with college decisions and whether to enroll. Subsequently, refugee students may choose to seek employment as a means to support their education as well as their family financially. Refugee students heavily rely on FAFSA as well as further financial aid resources in order to fund their higher education (Hoff & Shreet, 2020; Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Interwoven concerns of refugee students regarding financial aid are the difficulties navigating application logistics, as well as concerns of the extent of financial aid support. Contrastingly, refugees still regard higher education as an avenue for social and economic mobility (Leo, 2021; Phan, 2018) and as such decide to pursue a postsecondary degree.

Familial Commitments

Familial commitments are heavily evident across PAIR participants. Ties to familial responsibilities include care for younger siblings including academic support as well as financial support. These commitments hinder students from completing coursework in a greater capacity and may have subsequent impacts of decreased levels of organizational involvement. Through decreased involvement in student organizations, students may face a lack of sense of belonging throughout their higher education community. A sense of belonging has proven to be vital for student success and retention (O’Keeffe, 2013), but it can be hard to obtain for refugee students (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Belonging refers to an individual’s feeling of fit, acceptance, and inclusion by a group or their surrounding environment, most commonly pertaining to HE (O’Keeffe, 2013). According to O’Keeffe (2013), refugee students’ socialization and belonging among their peers can be an indicator of higher educational success, since students who do not feel welcome or included are more likely to leave school before completing their degrees.

Social Well-Being

Dimensions of social integration and acceptance (Keyes, 1998) are imperative to refugee students’ transition to higher education. From both the selected literature and student interviews, refugee students highlight the importance of personal networks and connections to establish community within the higher education landscape (Kingston & Karakas, 2022). Avenues of relationship building are evident through the classroom, as well as the student organizations potentially joined. These networks serve as a support for cultural adjustment to higher education. Boundaries prevalent in social well-being, however, can be observed through deficit language proficiencies. Tuliao et. al (2017) note that a lack of language proficiency can inhibit refugees from building these connections. Interviews highlighted that students oftentimes faced hesitation to form connections with others due to a fear of judgment as a result of language barriers. Still, social well-being from the effects of network connections remains imperative to the student experience and student success.

Areas for Future Consideration

Given the scope of the project, we focused on PAIR students who were in their Global Scholar program. To make the results more generalizable, future researchers might use different samples of refugee students who have attended HEIs. Moreover, future researchers could focus on students who have just arrived in the country. Given that language barriers are a considerable barrier for refugee students, future research may focus on students who are not in the PAIR program and those who have not been as adjusted to the US as PAIR students (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Upwardly Global, 2023). Further, given that PAIR Houston and surrounding institutions are located within a large metropolitan area, there may be differences in their experiences compared to refugee students in rural or non-metropolitan areas (Kaplan et al., 2021). Additionally, future research could focus on all 50 states instead of just the 18 that we focused on.

implications and recommendations

Sense of Belonging and Success

As we have learned through interviewing PAIR students, time management in college can be a difficult task. Students expressed difficulty balancing school and work schedules as well as hesitancy around getting involved on campus. It is known that a sense of belonging and a feeling of inclusion boosts retention rates and persistence throughout college (Pedler et al., 2022). As persistence to a second year of college is one of PAIR's programmatic goals, alleviating this frustration with time management should be prioritized. It is recommended that PAIR reframe the discussion surrounding becoming involved on campus as students tend to see it as an additional responsibility to undertake. Student organizations serve as avenues to work on conversational English skills, build social connections, and deepen understanding of learning that takes place within the classroom. Involvement on campus in both academic and social activities is one of the most significant factors as it relates to retention making it an area in which PAIR can improve the experiences and outcomes of their students (Dost & Mazzoli-Smith, 2023).

This reframing of involvement may be enhanced by a physical location on campus that serves as a central point of information and resources (e.g., language assistance, academic guidance, and resource referral) for refugee students. Providing a physical location for refugee students to seek assistance, along with these locations being staffed with knowledgeable professionals, is likely to increase the possibility of refugee students reaching out for help when they need it. PAIR students have emphasized how beneficial it is for PAIR to have a physical location to visit when they need assistance, so attending institutions that offer a model that is similar to what these students were used to in high school is likely to lead to a higher level of success than attending institutions that do not offer this model. It is recommended to advocate for refugee support centers at institutions that don't currently have them and to ensure refugee students are knowledgeable about institutions that do offer these centers. Refugee support centers offer a hub for vital information and resources for refugee students, and these centers also mimic the current support structure that PAIR students currently receive.

Cost of College

Additionally, student interviews revealed that most college decisions were primarily based on the cost of college. Refugee students felt as though they needed to opt for a two-year community college because it offered courses at a lower price than four-year university alternatives. While this is also seen in other student populations, PAIR students also emphasized the desire to know more about the true cost of higher education and how to alleviate the load with financial aid and scholarships. Students are able to compare tuition rates or examine their semester tuition bills, but some students do not understand the full cost of college including things such as room and board, textbooks, and transportation. Although PAIR currently conducts workshops exploring this topic, students expressed the desire for more information. This coincides with obtaining scholarships through personal essay writing and maintaining scholarships by being aware of individual requirements. It is recommended that PAIR expand upon its workshop curriculum for financial responsibility post-graduation, as well as expand its curriculum concerning scholarship attainment.

Also, our state and institutional policy review offers potential avenues for addressing refugee student price sensitivity. State-level policies offering in-state tuition to refugees and institutional policies providing free support services (e.g., English language training) or waived application/proficiency testing fees may have significant positive impact on refugee students' financial accessibility to, and success in, higher education. These policies found in other states and institutions offer an array of potential points of advocacy. It is recommended for PAIR to use these examples in future efforts to institutionalize financial accessibility for refugee students in Texas and its HEIs.

Aspirations and College Decisions

Moreover, it is recommended that PAIR inform students of both the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in two-year or four-year institutions in order for students to make informed decisions based on their ambitious aspirations. When students were asked about their future careers, the majority of students noted their desire to pursue service-oriented industries. These students are going to college with the intention of paying it forward and helping others as well as improving circumstances for themselves and their families. This desire potentially stems from their experiences as refugees and their cultures which value the collective, a sense of community, and family. Considering that most of these career aspirations require extensive education, PAIR students should be equipped with information about which programs can help them achieve these goals. Students should fully understand the pathways to and outcomes of each type of institution.

Reaching PAIR's Goals

Recognizing the areas discussed above such as belonging on campus, financial concerns, and reaching their career goals by increasing program efforts will allow these refugee students to feel better equipped to take on college and advocate for themselves. It is recommended that PAIR gradually move from a one to one to facilitation approach by creating a resource repository that builds a set of tools that allow students to thrive after PAIR. This approach allows PAIR as an organization to reach its goals and potentially extend its reach while also acknowledging the concerns of students and boosting their confidence.

Additionally, we found that many institutions offer a variety of resources for refugee students and their families to make the application process and time in college easier. These resources would be extremely beneficial to refugees who did not utilize PAIR programming or came into the country at a later date. We recognize that PAIR students generally have a better support system due to their PAIR involvement, but it is unrealistic to claim that PAIR students would never access these institutional resources. Therefore, some of these features may be applicable to future PAIR students as PAIR continues to grow. It is recommended to keep all beneficial accessibility features in mind for potential implementation.

English Language Training

Another thing we considered when analyzing state and local policy is the availability of accessible resources. Some states, we have found, offer vast English language training to refugees in their states, including multiple training formats, extended availability of English support, and special services that include English support with landlords, job opportunities, etc. On the other hand, some states are very limited in their provision. Texas, for example, specifically states that English language training will only be available to refugees while they are engaged in employment training. As soon as they secure a job, language support drops off (Tex. Admin. Code § 376.602).

Given that Texas state's goal of having refugees obtain employment within weeks of arrival, mere weeks of English language training and support is all the state offers to its refugee population. The implications of these policies are vast. If states do not offer English language training, refugees are left to seek this elsewhere, typically having to pay for it, reducing the capital they are able to bring in. States that do offer robust English language training and support provide refugees with increased opportunities to improve language skills, raising their comfortability in navigating the societies they live in, the jobs they work in, and the relationships they foster. The final recommendation is that advocating for extended English language training will support refugees throughout more than their first few weeks in the country, and will alleviate financial constraints as refugees navigate a new country. Having more testing options available to students may be a supportive feature, due to the diversity in nature of the testing options themselves. Some tests are online, some in-person, and others on paper. Additionally, it is likely that different tests require different amounts of time, with varying levels of questions. Making multiple tests available to students and not requiring one test for all students may help increase student access to admissions.

English Proficiency Test Options

A factor that differed significantly between institutions is how many English proficiency testing options they accepted. The institutions ranged from only accepting one test, to allowing students to submit from a list of twelve different testing options. English proficiency tests all have the same baseline of ensuring that students have proficient reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, but the approach that each test takes is different. Some tests offer computer-based and paper-based versions, while others only offer one type. Some tests have a primary use of academics, while others are used for a variety of reasons and aren't specifically academically-based. Institutions that offer more English proficiency testing options encourage students to choose a test that plays to their strengths, whereas when there is only one test option, refugee students can feel limited in their potential for success.

PAIR students currently in the Global Ambassadors program all arrived to the United States at a younger age, and therefore would likely test out of most institutional English proficiency requirements. Although this implication is likely not applicable to current PAIR students, there is potential for PAIR to have students in the future that arrived in the country later and therefore would have to test for English proficiency at higher education institutions. In that case, the notion of English proficiency testing diversity at institutions would be beneficial to present to those students so that they are prepared for the options that they have. It is recommended to educate all PAIR students in the types of English proficiency tests that institutions typically require for admission. It is also recommended to advocate for institutions to be more accessible in the testing options that they offer.

conclusion

This research explored the experiences of refugee students who are pursuing higher education alongside both the intricacies of state and institutional policies impacting these students' access and success and the challenges they face at universities and community colleges. We analyzed data from 18 state refugee policies and conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with PAIR program participants. This allowed us to understand the experiences of refugee students in higher education from two perspectives: policy variations and student aspirations and challenges.

The analysis of state policies revealed significant differences, particularly regarding ESL provision, in-state tuition access, and the availability of dedicated refugee support offices. By examining state and institutional resources for refugee students, this project has shed light on the considerable barriers they face, including challenges in admission procedures, financial aid, and awareness of available resources. State and institutional policies play a pivotal role in enhancing refugees' access to and success in higher education, addressing their financial constraints, and fostering a sense of belonging. For instance, state-level policies that grant in-state tuition could be supplemented by waiving application or proficiency testing fees and offering cost-free support services to improve financial accessibility. Additionally, establishing dedicated physical spaces as refugee support centers on college campuses can significantly enhance refugee students' sense of belonging and, consequently, their

academic achievement. These policies reflect the efforts undertaken by organizations like PAIR and can serve as valuable insights for informing future support and advocacy initiatives.

Our findings from the student experience revealed that students prioritize a sense of belonging, participation in campus organizations, and pursuing healthcare-related careers. However, they also encounter obstacles such as family obligations, language barriers, and financial burdens that impede their success. These factors, combined with proximity to home, significantly shape their college decision-making process. Amid these challenges, refugee students find PAIR to be an invaluable resource in their pursuit of higher education. PAIR's commitment to regularly assisting refugee students has resulted in positive outcomes, as evidenced by student feedback. With a goal of achieving a 70% success rate in second-year college enrollment, PAIR aims to promote self-sufficiency and lessen dependency on its services (PAIR's Logic Model, 2022). Students consistently express gratitude for PAIR's assistance in navigating the complexities of college access for refugees. For example, Noah expresses his joy every time he visits PAIR after school, while August attributes his college acceptance to PAIR's support. These examples underscore the significant impact of PAIR's efforts. While suggestions for improvement are valuable, it's essential to recognize the outstanding work PAIR is already doing and the profound effect it has on the students it serves.

conclusion (continued)

Finally, our investigation has highlighted several key areas for enhancing the support and success of refugee students in higher education. Time management emerged as a significant challenge, necessitating interventions to ease the transition to college life. Reframing campus involvement as a pathway to academic and social growth, along with establishing dedicated physical spaces for refugee support, can foster a crucial sense of belonging for student retention. Addressing financial concerns is vital, with recommendations including expanded workshop curricula on financial responsibility and advocacy for state and institutional policies that improve financial accessibility. Additionally, informing students about the pros and cons of two-year versus four-year institutions aligns with their ambitious career aspirations and ensures informed decision-making. As the college program evolves, transitioning to a facilitation approach and advocating for institutional resources will further empower students beyond their PAIR experience. Furthermore, advocating for extended English language training and diverse English proficiency testing options can better support refugee students in navigating the higher education landscape. By addressing these recommendations, PAIR Houston can continue to empower refugee students on their path to academic and professional success.



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Appendices

Appendix A: Student Experience Codebook

Theme	Question	Code(s)	Definition/Description
Demographics	When did you arrive in Houston/United States?	year of arrival	individual's period of arrival
Demographics	Where did you live before Houston?	country of origin	an account of the individual's prior residence
Demographics	How old were you?	age of arrival	the individual's age upon arrival
Demographics	Could you tell me more about your family?	family	description of family that arrived with the student
		refugee experience	description of events in refugee camps or other countries
Demographics	Who do you live with?	living arrangement	description of living arrangements
Education	Where do you currently go to school?	college type	identifying two or four year institution
Education	What are you studying?	major	identifying major pursued in postsecondary education
Education	Please tell me about your experience in high school? What was it like in school?	hs experience	narrative of high school education
Education	What kind of classes were you enrolled in during high school?	type of hs course	a description of courses taken in high school
		general support	support or assistance provided either in high school or college by non-program members
Education	Did you go to school before you lived in Houston/United States?	prior schooling	the individual's education prior to migration
ESL	If you are in college ESL classes, what has your experience been like?	experience	a personal account of the ESL classes in college
ESL	Do your ESL classes help you in your other college classes?	benefit	the individual's thoughts on the benefits of ESL classes
Application Process	Could you please tell me what it was like to apply to college?	applying	Explanation of the application process
Application Process	What parts of applying to college were difficult for you?	difficulties	the challenges of navigating the application process

Application Process	What or who helped you when you were applying to colleges/deciding what to do after high school?	assistance	who/what eased the process of applying
Application Process	What would have been helpful when you were applying to colleges/deciding what to do after high school?	extra help	additional information needed when applying/deciding
Financial Barriers	How did the cost of college affect your decisions when you were applying to colleges or deciding what to do after high school?	cost of college	the individuals thoughts on and experiences with the cost of college
Financial Barriers	If you received financial aid (money from the government, loans or scholarships), how did it affect you?	financial aid	the individuals thoughts on the benefits of financial aid
College Decisions	Can you tell me what it was like when you were filling out the FAFSA? What parts of filling out the FAFSA were difficult for you or your family?	fafsa	the specifics of the fafsa experience
College Decisions	What made you decide to go to college?	influencing factors	a list of factors that affected an individual's college decisions
Transportation	If transportation, how do you get to school?	transportation	the effect of transportation on college decisions
School Involvement	What activities are you involved in other than school like extracurriculars, jobs, or sports?	work	job involvement outside of school
		sports	sports outside of school
School Involvement	Would you like to be involved in other activities?	participation interest	student interest in joining more activities
School Involvement	What is stopping you? If you have other responsibilities, what are they?	other responsibilities	barriers to joining activities
Inclusivity	What makes you feel welcome at school?	sense of belonging	does school feel like an inclusive environment
Inclusivity	Do specific people make you feel welcome? (Professors or classmates)	faculty/staff	do professors make school feel inclusive
		classmates	do classmates make school feel inclusive
Inclusivity	Do you see your values represented?	values	do students see their personal values at their school
Program	What have your experiences been like with the PAIR college program?	program experience	feelings about PAIR's college program
Program	What is most helpful about the program?	program help	Who/what helped you in the PAIR program

Program	How would you change the PAIR college program to make it better?	improvement	improvements students would like for Pair
Aspirations	If you did not have to worry about barriers, what would your dream job be?	dream job	student career aspirations
Aspirations	Clarify that a barrier is anything that would make it more difficult to achieve something, in this case their dream job. Can give examples: cost of attendance, transportation, language, etc.	barriers	things students feel can stop them from achieving dream job
Advice	What advice do you have for students who are graduating high school?	Advice	students impart their knowledge for recent grads
Advice	Thinking back to when you were applying to college, is there anything you would have done differently or information you wish you knew sooner?	lessons learned	information the student has learned throughout the process

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Research Introduction

A team from Texas A&M University is conducting research to understand what resources and services are accessible to refugee students when pursuing higher education. We also want to start to understand what can be addressed to promote refugee student support for higher education. I have about 12 questions to ask that we hope will help us understand your experiences.

Consent Form

- Explain the purpose of the consent form.
- Please take a minute to review the consent form and let me know if you have any questions. Please know we will not use your real name in any reports or publications that come from this research. We will provide you with a pseudonym that you can pick!

TURN ON RECORDER

Introduction Questions

1. Could you please introduce yourself?

Probe: What is your name?

Probe: When did you arrive in Houston/United States? Where did you live before Houston?

How old were you?

Probe: Could you tell me more about your family? Who do you live with?

Probe: Where do you currently go to school and what are you studying?

2. Please tell me about your experience in high school? What was it like in school?
 - Probe: What kind of classes were you enrolled in during high school?
AP, Dual Credit, ESL? If so, how many years?
 - Probe: Did you go to school before you lived in Houston/United States?
(If yes), can you tell me about it?
3. If you are in college ESL classes, what has your experience been like?
 - Probe: Do your ESL classes help you in your other college classes?

Main Questions:

4. What made you decide to go to college?
 - Probe: Why did you choose that particular school/program?
Four year university or community college?
Cost, transportation, curriculum?
 - Probe: If transportation, how do you get to school?
5. Could you please tell me what it was like to apply to college?
 - Probe: What parts of applying to college were difficult for you?
Forms, tests, etc? (TSI, TOEFL, Accuplacer, Alex)
 - Probe: What or who helped you when you were applying to colleges?
 - Probe: What or who helped you when deciding what to do after high school?
 - Probe: What would have been helpful when you were applying to colleges?
 - Probe: What would have been helpful when you were deciding what to do after high school?
6. How did the cost of college affect your decisions when you were applying to colleges or deciding what to do after high school?
 - Probe: If you received financial aid, how did it affect you?
Financial Aid refers to money from the government, loans or scholarships
 - Probe: Can you tell me what it was like when you were filling out the FAFSA?
 - Probe: What parts of filling out the FAFSA were difficult for you or your family?
7. What activities are you involved in other than school like extracurriculars, jobs, or sports?
 - Probe: Would you like to be involved in other activities?
 - Probe: What is stopping you?
If you have other responsibilities, what are they?
8. What makes you feel welcome on campus?
 - Probe: Do specific people make you feel welcome? (Professors or classmates)
9. What resources or programs provided by your college are helpful?
 - Probe: How could your college help you be more successful?
 - Probe: Where else do you get resources?
 - Probe: Is there anything that you need that is not provided?
By either your school or community?
10. What have your experiences been like with the PAIR college program?
 - Probe: What is most helpful about the program?
 - Probe: How would you change the PAIR college program to make it better?
 - Probe: If PAIR had the opportunity to do more, what would you recommend?
11. If you did not have to worry about barriers, what would your dream job be?
 - Probe: A barrier is anything that would make it more difficult to achieve something.
In this case their dream job.
Can give examples: cost of attendance, transportation, language, etc.

Wrap-up Question:

11. What advice do you have for students who are graduating high school?

Probe: Thinking back to when you were applying to college, is there anything you would have done differently or information you wish you knew sooner?

Concluding Statement: We have asked you a series of questions, is there anything you feel that we missed? Is there anything else you would like to share? Do you have any questions for us?

Appendix C: Policy Codebook

Code	Description
Refugee Definition	Any mention of defining refugee status.
In-state tuition for refugees	Any mention of in-state tuition (or equivalent).
State ESL provision	Any mention of state program(s) providing ESL/ELL courses.
State refugee office	Any mention of the existence of a state refugee office.
Education focus	Any mention of a state refugee office's focus on education.
English proficiency test	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements for students whose first/primary language is not English.
Accuplacer	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to Accuplacer.
Accuplacer ESL	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to Accuplacer ESL.
ACT	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to ACT.
ACT English	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to ACT English.
British Ordinary Level English Language Exam	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to British Ordinary Level English Language Exam.

Code	Description
CAEL	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to CAEL.
Cambridge English	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to Cambridge English.
CASAS	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to CASAS.
CELSA	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to CELSA.
Duolingo	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to Duolingo.
E3PT	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to E3PT.
EAP	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to EAP.
EIKEN	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to EIKEN.
Eltis	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to Eltis.
FLS	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to FLS.
GPA	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to GPA.
GTEC	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to GTEC.
HiSET	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to HiSET.
IELTS	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to IELTS.
iTEP	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to iTEP.
ITP	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to ITP.
Kaplan	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to Kaplan.
MELAB	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to MELAB.
MET	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to MET.
Oxford ELLT	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to Oxford ELLT.

Code	Description
Pearson's PTE	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to Pearson's PTE.
PTE	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to PTE.
SAT	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to SAT.
SAT English	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to SAT English.
SAT Reading	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to SAT Reading.
School-specific	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to a school-specific test.
State-specific	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to a state-specific test.
TOEFL cBT	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to TOEFL cBT.
TOEFL iBT	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to TOEFL iBT.
TOEFL pBT	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to TOEFL pBT.
TOEIC	Any mention of English proficiency test requirements related to TOEIC.
College ESL courses	Any mention of college ESL/ELL courses offered to students.
Non-credit-bearing*	Any mention of non-credit-bearing status of ESL/ELL courses offered to students.
Credit-bearing*	Any mention of credit-bearing status of ESL/ELL courses offered to students.

Code	Description
Cost*	Any mention of the cost of ESL/ELL courses offered to students.
Financial aid eligibility*	Any mention of financial aid eligibility status of ESL/ELL courses offered to students.
Barrier to enrollment	Any notable barriers to enrollment for refugees.
College support feature	Any notable accessibility special feature for refugees.
State support feature	Any notable state support feature.
Exceptions	Any notable exceptions for refugees.

*nested under “College ESL courses” code