

# Strategies for Serving Internationally Trained Professionals in Adult Basic Education

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## Abstract

Immigrant students are served in adult basic education programs across the country. This includes internationally trained professionals who often face nonrecognition of their foreign credentials and experience, leading to underemployment and a devaluation of skills. This article explores this issue from the perspective of a local program at Georgia Piedmont Technical College, where staff are attempting to create solutions to address the problem. Strategies implemented include credential evaluation, college and career pathway opportunities, and diverse funding sources.

**Keywords:** immigrants, refugees, credential recognition

Adult basic education (ABE) programs can serve as one of the entry points for immigrants arriving in the United States. These individuals may enter an ABE program for purposes such as gaining English proficiency, obtaining a U.S.-based high school equivalency (HSE), or accessing the career pathways that ABE programs increasingly offer. Among this student population is an often-hidden issue that can present challenges to program teachers and staff – the issue of brain waste and occupational downgrading.

In the United States, 21% of immigrants with college degrees, also referred to as internationally trained professionals (ITPs), are either unemployed or underemployed, a phenomenon termed *brain waste* in reference to the underutilization of skills and education among immigrants and how it poses a problem both to the individual and to the United States as neither can benefit from the skills and expertise

of this population (Batalova & Fix, 2021). Scholars have further found that immigrants experience this form of underemployment as occupational downgrading in which the occupation obtained in the U.S. does not match previous occupations or education credentials (Adversario, 2021; Akresh, 2006). This often results in a U-shaped trajectory in which immigrants experience occupational downgrading but increase occupational status as they gain capital in the new country (Zorlu, 2016). While this complex issue cannot be resolved easily, institutions and organizations such as ABE programs can play a role in beginning to address these concerns at the local level.

Georgia Piedmont Technical College (GPTC) is located in Clarkston, Georgia, where 49.4% of the population is foreign born (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Due to our large immigrant student population, we encounter the issue of brain waste regularly among our students, sometimes

unsolicited. For example, in one of our English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, a student shared about his overseas experience as a surgeon. During enrollment for one of our career pathway programs, a student working to earn his HSE casually stated that he was a former nurse in his home country. The more we converse with our immigrant students and ask details about their lives, the more individuals we meet who may already have secondary school diplomas, university degrees, and extensive work experience from their home country. In response, our program staff has gradually implemented strategies to better serve these students and increase recognition of their abilities and knowledge.

## Serving Internationally Trained Professionals

Our process for serving ITPs has emerged and developed iteratively over a period of about a year as we have grown in our understanding of this issue. We now integrate specific services into our program for students who fall into this category, including assistance with credential evaluation, guidance into career or college pathways, and finding creative solutions to fund students in these pathways. Often, it is not one but a combination of these services that must be tailored to the individual situation of each student.

Like many programs nationwide, GPTC's Adult Education Department operates with a largely part-time teaching staff while administrators take on a variety of roles, including overseeing instructional quality, designing and implementing new programs such as integrated education and training (IET), registering and testing students, and maintaining daily operations. My own role is similar. As instructional coordinator, I am primarily responsible for supporting our teachers,

overseeing curriculum, and working with other team members to run IETs. I have additionally become the staff member most often advising ITPs who are referred to me by other staff. Because my role often spans ESOL, HSE, credit programs, and Economic Development (all divisions within our technical college), this makes me more aware of how each department operates, information that I can then use to better guide students.

Cleaning this information over time did not come easily. When beginning to counsel students, I had extensive communication with various employees across the college to learn about admissions procedures, including the processing of foreign transcripts, financial aid options, and career programs. While I have learned a great deal, this learning process continues as I still encounter student situations that lie outside of my scope of knowledge. The connections I have made with colleagues beyond adult education and throughout the entire college help facilitate this ongoing learning as they provide access to needed expertise.

## Identifying Eligible Students

Our ABE team works closely on a variety of projects to best serve our students, communicating frequently and thoroughly on various programmatic issues and topics. Teachers and intake staff, therefore, are aware of what I have learned and that I am a resource for the ITPs they encounter who may need additional support. Students are typically referred to me by these colleagues either informally through word of mouth or by email. These referrals primarily originated from our ESOL program but are increasingly coming from our HSE program where ITPs in our community often end up due to being told they need a U.S.-based equivalency.

For our ESOL program, referrals most often come from the high-intermediate and advanced classes

where students have developed strong English proficiency and are interested in pursuing college or career options. Teachers regularly share with them the opportunities available through our college and find out which students are ITPs, whom they then refer to me. Many of these students inquire about our HSE program as the next step towards their goals. My first question to them is whether or not they have a secondary school diploma or post-secondary degree from their home country. If the answer is yes, we discuss credential evaluation.

### **Credential Evaluation**

The process of validating foreign diplomas and degrees can be intimidating for immigrant students, assuming they are even aware that it is an option. There are many companies to choose from, making it difficult for students to know where to begin. Additionally, I have observed that many immigrant students are hesitant to provide personal information to an unknown company. This could be especially true for refugees with traumatic backgrounds. Refugees may also have fled their home country without bringing their educational documents (Loo, 2016), presenting another barrier to the evaluation process. Despite these challenges, however, credential evaluation is an important option to consider when counseling ITPs. It can provide shortcuts by validating their prior education rather than requiring them to repeat schooling. It can also validate them as individuals as they see their prior education taking on meaning within the U.S. context. It must, however, be considered in view of the goals of the student and whether it will contribute to those goals. Some students may have employment goals that do not necessitate an evaluation, or others may not need a full evaluation of their post-secondary credentials because they plan to pursue a different career pathway and only need a

secondary school equivalency to enter college.

When beginning to learn about credential evaluation, I was similarly overwhelmed by the broad scope of options. As a starting point, I went to the admissions page of GPTC's website and found a list of recommended evaluation companies, all of which are members of the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services. I then met with our admissions staff to confirm the companies on the list and ask if any were preferred. I also contacted an expert at one of the companies and another expert who works in the field independently to learn about the evaluation process so that I could better guide our students.

Prior to 2022, our staff would typically refer students to an evaluation company without much knowledge of the process and without any involvement after the referral. This has gradually changed upon observing what our students actually need. When I began referring students to companies and following up with them, most students would respond that they never contacted the company or tried and failed. It became clear that for most of our students, they needed step-by-step guidance. I therefore began scheduling appointments with individual students, first to explain the process and the companies, and then to help students complete the online application and answer any questions or concerns they had during the process. A couple of students were able to apply on their own when given the application link, but most students have requested assistance when offered.

While this may seem like daunting work to take on amid other responsibilities, I have found it to add only a small load of work but generate meaningful outcomes for students. For example, our program serves approximately 2,000 students annually. From November 2022

through March 2023, I helped seven students apply for credential evaluation. So far, three of those students have received an equivalency, and one applied for admission to our college. I track meetings, application submissions, and results in a spreadsheet that I check periodically so I can follow up with students, but these tasks do not detract from my ongoing responsibilities.

### ***Credential Evaluation for Refugees***

As mentioned earlier, refugees may have fled their home country quickly, leaving behind important documents such as diplomas and degrees. World Education Services (WES, 2023) is an evaluation company offering a program called Gateway that serves individuals from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Türkiye, Ukraine, and Venezuela who have limited access to their educational documents. This particular evaluation was not initially accepted at our college, so I approached GPTC's Student Affairs Department asking if our college would accept this particular evaluation given the number of refugee students in our community. The department agreed, increasing college accessibility for those who fled and have limited documentation.

### ***Funding Credential Evaluation***

Credential evaluation typically costs between \$100 and \$300 per individual. Most students I have worked with have the funds and are willing to pay for the evaluation. For refugees, we work closely with the resettlement agencies that often have funds that can be spent towards credential evaluation. Finally, we continue to seek ways to incorporate credential evaluation costs into grant applications as a way to offset the financial burden and provide additional support to students.

### ***Career Pathways***

In addition to credential evaluation, we use our IET programs to fast-track ITPs into careers,

whether careers that align with the field in which they have education and experience or a different field they may want to try instead. We currently offer certified nursing assistant, manufacturing, and commercial driver's license IETs. Students who have experience in the health care field are often interested in our certified nursing assistant program, for example. While this is an entry-level position, it can provide access to the field and puts them on a clear pathway for future education and opportunities.

Sometimes, we are able to move a student further down the career pathway based on his or her experience. For example, a recent ESOL student showed me his resume, which included extensive experience as a plant manager overseas. Rather than referring him to the manufacturing program, where he would start from scratch, we connected him with the economic development instructor, who introduced the student to a local employer needing employees with this student's skillset. The company was eager to interview him when learning about his experience.

### ***College Programs***

Many of our ITP students are interested in entering college, either because they finished secondary school and want to continue their education or because they want to pursue a new field. As described earlier, one of the ways we help facilitate this is assisting students with credential evaluation so they are qualified to attend, including through the WES Gateway program that our college now accepts.

Another entryway into college is through our new Career Plus program, which allows students to combine various HSE options (such as a HSE test with certain classes from a high school transcript or completing asynchronous high school courses) and earn two technical certificates of credit (TCC)

in order to receive a high school diploma. While ITPs may not be able to pull credits from a high school transcript, they may be able to include other experiences. For example, one of our immigrant students in this program completed a prior learning assessment for her work as a child development specialist, awarding her the two TCCs, and is now almost finished with taking the asynchronous high school courses.

### ***Funding for College***

Finding funding sources for immigrant students entering college has been a significant challenge. Students do not qualify for in-state tuition until they have lived in the state of Georgia for 1 year. Otherwise, they are categorized as international students and have to pay four times the tuition of students designated as in-state. This continues to be a barrier for our newly arrived students eager to enter college who have to wait until they receive the 1-year status.

Two significant funding sources for Georgia students are the Pell Grant and HOPE Grant. The Pell Grant is government funded and the HOPE Grant is specific to Georgia and funded by a state lottery. However, neither of these grants will fund tuition for students who already have a postsecondary degree, including foreign degrees, eliminating them as a resource for most ITPs. At

GPTC, we have had to find creative options for funding students interested in college. One option is a local nonprofit that provides tuition services up to \$5,000 for students who are income eligible. Title I funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act is another option, as are scholarship opportunities at GPTC. Determining the funding options for students has to be done on an individual basis due to the various circumstances of each person.

### **Conclusion**

The strategies described above are ones we have found to be effective in beginning to tackle the issue of brain waste and better serve our ITP students. We have learned a lot, but as stated earlier, this process is iterative. We will continue to grow and adapt as we make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. More attention needs to be given to this issue, however, as program staff like our own may be struggling to know how to best guide this unique population of students. Additional resources and knowledge could make a significant impact on these students, helping to connect their lives in their home countries to their new lives here in the U.S. ABE programs are often the first stop for these individuals, and we must be better trained and equipped to serve them in a capacity that meets their needs.

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