

GUIDE FOR UNIVERSITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Universities can facilitate refugee access to their campuses by offering scholarship/ mentorship programs targeted towards the refugee student. This document will provide universities with necessary background information on challenges facing domestic and overseas refugees while accessing higher education in the US throughout the educational pipeline: pre-admission, after admission, and post- graduation. It also provides sets of recommendations on addressing these challenges to make US campuses more accessible and welcoming for refugee students. These recommendations require full collaboration between different players on campus: presidents, administrators, deans of schools, directors of programs, office of admissions, office of financial aid, office of international students, faculty and students.



**UNDERSTAND
YOUR TARGET
AUDIENCE**

Identify Your Target Population

In order to create a scholarship program, you have first to identify your target population. You might choose to target one category of the below-mentioned categories, combine different categories, or open the program to all categories. We advise you to think deeply about your target population and understand different definitions, statuses, and needs.

1. Domestic Asylum seekers: Asylum seeker is someone who has “sought international protection and whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined by the immigration” (UNHCR 2017, p. 56). This group of refugee students is dealt with as international students, and they don’t usually have access to financial aid and in-state tuition.

2. Domestic students with refugee status: This group of students often come to the US through the US resettlement program or have accepted asylum-seeking applications. They usually have the same access to financial aid and pay the same rate as American students. However, they cannot enjoy these rights until they get their permanent residency, which might take a year or longer to be issued.

3. Temporary Protected Status (TPS): “Individuals are designated as TPS by The Secretary of Homeland Security due to conditions in their home country that temporarily prevent the country’s nationals from returning safely, or in certain circumstances, where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately” (USCIS). The tuition rate paid by TPS students is left to the state to specify, some states such as Massachusetts allow TPS to pay conditional in state-tuition. On the other side, TPS students are not eligible for Federal financial aid, except Cuban/ Haitian in certain circumstances.

5. International refugee students: are usually students who are officially recognized as refugees in other countries by UNHCR or national governments. They must follow the F1 visa application process like any international student to come to the US. They don’t have access to financial aid and must pay international student rates; on top of this, the costs of tests and application fees add up and can be prohibitive.

You can learn more about the different statuses via the definitions matter section available [here](#).

Reach The Targeted Population

If domestic, reach out to refugee resettlement agencies in your community or nonprofit organizations which work on refugees' issues to connect with local refugee students.

If international, think about partnering with international organizations such as UNHCR or other organizations that work with refugees in different countries.

“At least one student per university would elevate the understanding of this crisis and bring to the forefront what universities as leading members of society can do to address it. It’s not just humanitarian organizations that can help address the crisis.”

*Paul Hersh
Director*

Columbia University Scholarship for Displaced Persons



DESIGNING

THE

PROGRAM

Program Design

Universities are not left alone figuring out how to design a scholarship program. Here are some general recommendations to consider before setting any scholarship program.

- If the program targets domestic refugees, look for available data or do your research and survey the local community. For example, you can search how many refugees are in your local community, what resettlement agencies are nearby, where you could infuse professional opportunities for refugee-background students.
- Partner with organizations and universities with experience in refugee education access. Several organizations are eager to connect or collaborate with universities that want to start initiatives. [You can find here a list of these organizations.](#)
- Reach out to other universities that already established scholarship programs on their campuses; this will save you time and effort.
- Develop programming that is designed around student needs. Raymon Burton from One Refugee explains, “Schools often provide scholarships out of a desire for diversity...If the focus is on diversity, then the students aren’t going to be the focus and aren’t going to get the resources and support they need.”
- Start small, then scale up. You can start with admitting just one refugee student at a given time. View it as a learning process and scale up when ready.
- Avoid fixating on barriers - focus on the benefits the program will bring - not just for students but also for peers, staff, university, community, country.
- Identify a champion on campus who is willing to take the lead to get the initiative off the ground; this champion could be a faculty member, a department, or a student leader.
- Incorporate the scholarship program with a mentorship program to create an efficient and effective program.



EVEY
STAGE
MATTERS

For a successful and effective scholarship/mentorship program, it is better for university administrations to be aware of the different barriers facing refugees along the educational pipeline (Pre- admission- After admission- Post graduation) and cater to their needs at each stage.

Before admission, Recruitment Strategies:

Below are a few challenges and barriers that universities should consider while setting up their recruitment strategies:

For both domestic and overseas refugees:

- Opportunities are not fairly spread among refugee populations. Instead, opportunities are usually reserved for a specific category of students who has enough resources to go the extra mile, such as paying for private universities and English courses.
- Be prepared that students frequently have missing academic documentation or credentials. For example, they might be unable to access proof of certifications or recommendation letters. In addition, sometimes students have documentation or certificates but are unable to access or transfer them because their schools shut down or were destroyed.
- The American admission process is particular to the American context, and refugee students are unaware of its particularities. Sometimes refugees might have the required credentials, but they don't know how to market themselves in the American way, such as writing a personal essay or research statement.

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- The financial barriers go beyond tuition, application fees, costs of tests also add up and can be very prohibitive.

For refugee students overseas:

- In war-torn countries, students face different forms of restrictions such as movement, impacting their application process. For example, there's only one center in Syria that conducts offline SAT, and that is in Damascus. So all the students who want to take that test have to go to Damascus, which could be very risky.
- Immigration policy is the number one barrier. For example, it is difficult for a refugee student to secure an F1 visa to study in the US unless the university offers them a full sponsorship beyond tuition remission, room on board, and monthly stipend to work specific hours on campus in return.
- Some refugee students live in camps or areas of high vulnerability in all its multidimensional aspects: lack of quality education, food insecurity, physical insecurity, and more. Therefore, they cannot be held to the same admission standards as other international students.
- They face difficulties in obtaining travel documents, some refugees take them years to apply and receive their travel documents.
- They have limited or lack of access to computers and reliable internet to complete their applications and communicate with potential universities.
- Overseas refugees often live in camps where they lack of access to online payment platforms for application fees.

Below are some recommendations on how the universities can respond to these challenges and offer a refugee-friendly recruitment criterion.

- University administrations should be willing to admit refugee students and offer them scholarships even if they don't have excellent English and credentials

like other international students. In addition, universities could provide a year for preparation, allowing refugee students to improve their English skills and adapt to the US education system.

- Universities should be creative in establishing admission requirements that suit the refugee situation. For example, standardized SAT and TOEFL scores might not be viable all the time. If omitting tests is not an option, universities could design tests designed by the university itself.
- In case of difficulties accessing previous credentials, universities could use other credential assessment processes specific for refugee students or create their own one. For example, UNICEF qualifications passports for refugees and vulnerable migrants.
- Administrations could offer flexible, alternative opportunities for admission. For example, consider waiving the application fee or create an application form for refugee students which doesn't require a payment.
- Communicate with organizations already on the ground, these organizations could help the universities establish a recruitment strategy that suits their requirements, which is fair for the refugee students. For example, some of these organizations are already preparing refugee students to be college-ready, then the university would have a pool of candidates set for recruitment.

After admission, mentorship is a key:

The university needs to realize that offering the scholarship and advertising it on their website is a very welcoming and essential step. However, refugee challenges are not limited to the admission process. Here are few other challenges that refugees also face after admission:

For both overseas and domestic refugee students:

- After admission, students might mainly focus on the academic side of their higher education experience without giving the required attention to building their social and professional networks necessary for employment after graduation.
- Refugee students often face a combination of social and financial challenges. They usually have several responsibilities at home, and the majority have to work to support their families.
- Most Refugee students experience a diminished sense of belonging on campus due to spending less time on campus and the cross-cultural differences, which might slow their integration. Often, they come from a very high Poverty Index, or English is not their first language.
- Stereotypes and xenophobia on campuses can have harmful effects on students.
- Refugees often need mental health assessment and support; as most of the time, they have experienced traumatic events. However, while mental health services are usually available on campuses, the workforce does not always have training or skills to help populations dealing with displacement-related trauma and stressors.
- Some refugee students might not be aware of some services available on-campus, such as counseling and writing centers, or don't know how to navigate them.
- Due to the challenges mentioned above and more, some refugee students might not excel academically like other domestic or international students. Sometimes it might also take them longer to graduate.

Our primary suggestion to universities is to think sustainably: Colleges need to do more than just offer a scholarship to students with a background of displacement. It is essential to build a mentoring strategy to ensure students are supported on campus. The mentorship strategy should seek out a variety of partners at multiple levels on campus (faculty, admin, departmental, student organizations):

Below are some recommendations to support refugee students on campus:

Mobilize your campus community:

- Indicate faculty members interested in supporting refugees on the campus and who would be willing to provide academic mentorship.
- Offer Peer to peer mentorship that could be designed as part of a service-learning program or by engaging interested student organizations.
- Designate a staff member or office to house the scholarship/mentorship program and act as the reference point for refugee students on campus.
- Create or support student organizations and leadership on campus to help combat harmful stereotypes and build awareness and community- NLG; Peaceful Passions.
- Mobilize student advisors who could direct refugee students to programs that they might not have heard of, such as Marshalls, Fulbright, and Truman Fellowships.

Offer tailored services and spaces:

- Ensure the services offered on campuses such as mental health services, residence life, and dining halls are accessible for admitted refugees. Especially for international refugees during academic breaks who have no place to go.
- Reach out to counselors on your campus and discuss the ability to provide mental health counseling geared toward this population.
- Leverage social work clinics on campus and create a safe space for refugee students to meet and socialize on campus diversity and inclusion clubs.

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- Provide professional development opportunities on campus tailored towards refugee students and other underrepresented population needs such as networking events, facilitating informational interviews and internships.
 - Compile resource guides for students that include affordable mental health and legal services and both on and off-campus.

Build Partnerships:

- Partner with resettlement agencies and other local NGOs to learn from their expertise, such as training for student mentors.
- Partner with local community organizations that provide pro-bono or low-cost support geared toward this population.
- Partner with private businesses that are willing to provide internship opportunities for refugee students.

“The work is easy to do - we already do all of these things on college campuses.”

Dr. Diya Abdo
Founder

Every Campus a Refuge

Post graduation, extended support is a key:

The period after graduation might be challenging for all students. Providing support for refugee students during this stage is crucial for sustainable long-term success.

Challenges:

- Domestic refugee students usually find difficulties finding a job after graduation, often due to a lack of social and professional networks. Additionally, some come in with different expectations about higher education. For example, they might not be aware that they should be seeking internships during their studies, or their social and financial responsibilities would occupy them.
- Overseas refugee students mostly face difficulties getting their Optional Practical Training (OPT) as it is an overwhelming process. In addition, they mainly lack information about the process, what it entails, and how to get a job offer.

Recommendations:

- Provide professional development sessions to familiarize refugee students with social and professional networks' importance and prepare them for career life after graduation.
- For international students, make sure that the international office staff on campus are knowledgeable about refugee populations' needs after graduation and provide them with the necessary support to complete their OPT process.
- Establish a list of places that are willing to accept students as interns regardless of immigration status, on and off campus.
- Match refugees with corporates that support refugee causes and willing to offer them job opportunities.

“Displaced student progress should not always be compared to other populations; we need to consider where they are starting from. It is essential to acknowledge their progress from where they started and when they graduated, and it is not always about statistics”

Miriam Cing
SVR, Co-Chair

