

Use community colleges to incorporate immigrants

President Joe Biden has announced that America will accept 100,000 refugees fleeing war in Ukraine. And 76,000 Afghanis who have fled the Taliban have arrived since August 2021.

America accepts a great number of refugees. Government and charitable agencies supply refugees and immigrants with food, housing, medical supplies and other immediate life needs. But do we help them feel at home here and teach them how to live in a society probably very different from their own? Is there a way to more efficiently help America's latest group of sanctuary seekers achieve economic security and social integration in their adopted land?

Yes. The nation's nearly 1,200 community colleges are uniquely well-suited to play a vital role in this effort, by serving as a foundation for two proven strategies that accelerate inclusion: newcomer schools for youths and expanded citizenship classes for adults.

Since the 1980s, many U.S. public school districts have offered special grade K-12 programs called "newcomer schools." These provide intensive education designed to assist newly arrived students transitioning into the mainstream education system and general American life. Courses consist of English instruction, practical skills training and U.S. cultural literacy.

For adults, thousands of citizenship classes are found across the country in a myriad of venues ranging from public libraries and schools to churches and community centers. Their curricula concentrate on preparing immigrants for the U.S. Citizenship Test.

Why not combine these two endeavors and give them to institutions that already have the people and infrastructure to administer them? A coordinated nationwide network of "New Citizen Schools" could be housed within the current structure of community colleges, as a much-needed supplement to existing private efforts.

These colleges already offer quality ESL classes and job training programs, as well as a demographically diverse student body. The NCS program would be open to youth and adults, as well as K-12 students. Students would be organized by age level and English-language facility.

Funding would come from a base of federal, state and county education allotments. These would be supplemented by contributions from private foundations and American businesses and their affiliated trade associations that utilize immigrant workers, be they blue- or white-collar, high-tech or agricultural.

The New Citizens Schools would also work closely with a revamped Guest Worker Program offering immigrants what the GWP does not offer now: genuine access to education and economic mobility and legal oversight to prevent abuses by employers or criminals.

Those who complain about the cost of putting into place an expanded framework of focused assimilation programs should consider what it will cost if we don't have them.

The foundation for 19th- and 20th-century American economic growth was forged by a massive, decades-long investment of combined private-public funding for education, industry, transportation and science—powered by the human capital of foreign-born workers drawn from every corner of the globe.

A similar scale of concentrated investment should be applied now toward integrating newcomers who embody the nation's most adaptable and promising economic resource.

Top-performing economies of tomorrow (which is already here today) will depend not just on raw labor but on the inspired, inventive business visioning of workers and entrepreneurs seeking better ways to accomplish more in a constantly evolving global marketplace.

The visioning consistently delivered day in, day out at America's community colleges.

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