



# Do you know who your refugee students are?

Mapping and understanding displaced  
students on U.S. campuses



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**duolingo** english test

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**Do you know who your refugee students are?  
Mapping and understanding displaced students on U.S. campuses.  
November 2023**

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Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration  
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Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration

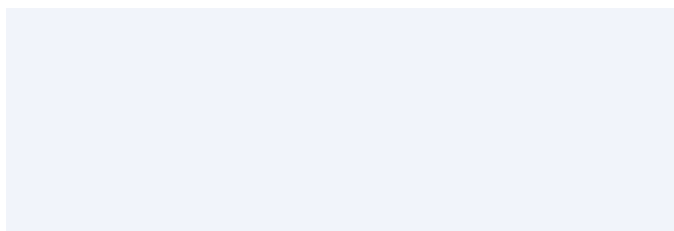
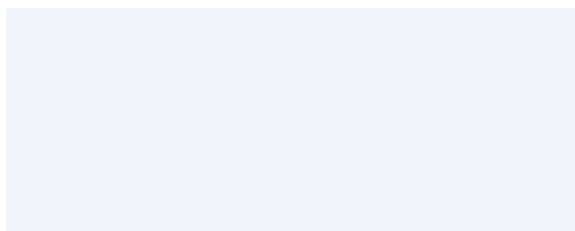
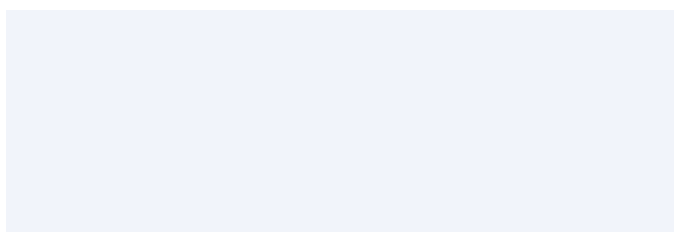
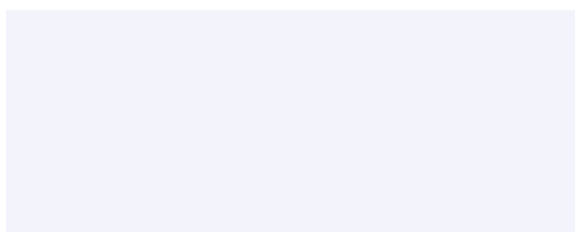
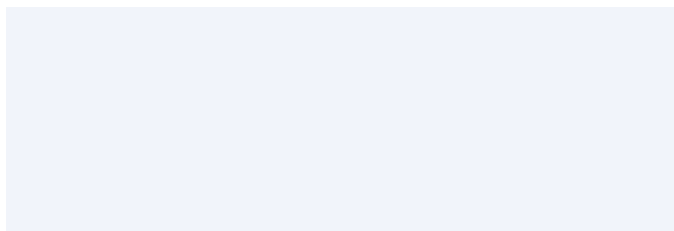
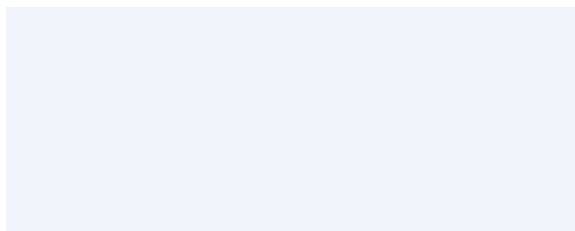
<https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/research/do-you-know-who-your-refugee-students-are-mapping-and-understanding-displaced-students-on-u-s-campuses>

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## Executive Summary

In the face of escalating global conflicts, a growing number of young people are being denied access to higher education. Statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reveal that only **seven** percent of globally-displaced refugee youth are currently enrolled in tertiary education, while their non-displaced peers experience a 42 percent enrollment rate. To address this stark disparity, UNHCR has set an ambitious “15by30” goal, aiming to provide 15 percent of refugee youth—numbering over 500,000—the opportunity to pursue higher education by 2030. While progress has been made, closing this education gap remains a significant challenge.

In the United States, despite a clear need for increased access to higher education for refugee and displaced students, essential data regarding their numbers, origins, and educational pathways remains largely unknown. A good number of these students seeking to pursue higher education in the U.S. enter as international students on F-1 visas. The national-level data on international students does not distinguish refugee students from other international peers. Collating different sources, this paper estimates that upwards of 54,060 F-1 international students in 2022/23 may be counted among the potential pool of refugee and displaced students studying in the U.S. This constitutes approximately five percent of the total international student population in the U.S. during the 2022/23 academic year. This figure does not include the higher education enrollment trends of refugee students who entered the U.S. with their families, whether through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program or as parolees, asylum seekers, or

unaccompanied minors, for which there is also little data. Without understanding the presence and needs of refugee students in U.S. higher education, on-the-ground initiatives aimed at helping refugee students will continue to operate in isolation, impeding advocacy efforts required to address the growing humanitarian crisis.

In response to these challenges, the Duolingo University Access (DUA) Program, launched in collaboration with UNHCR in 2021, offers crucial support to displaced students pursuing higher education in the U.S. and elsewhere. Partnering with over a dozen U.S. universities, the program provides a dedicated advisor to refugee students, who assists them with university selection, application requirements, scholarship opportunities, and navigating the F-1 visa interview process. This initiative showcases the potential for higher education institutions to address the global refugee crisis and foster transformative change.

Higher education needs to take a more active role in addressing the global refugee crisis, and every university has the capacity to play a role. To create more effective strategies for change, it is essential to establish a baseline of data and information to measure progress. Collaborative initiatives such as the DUA Program demonstrate the crucial role of higher education in aiding the integration of refugees and displaced students. These initiatives not only lead to individual success stories but also highlight the transformative power of education in overcoming barriers, achieving aspirations, and sparking positive change.





**Giving students access to higher education in the U.S. would help and prepare them, and provide them with the skillset and toolkit to implement strategies of change and to make peace and build resilient communities.**

SAMI SALLOUM

GRADUATE STUDENT, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOLARSHIP FOR DISPLACED STUDENTS

*Source: Student quotes taken from the Response Campaign, and can be found—along with more refugee student stories and videos on the Higher Ed Immigration Portal at [highereducationimmigrationportal.org](https://highereducationimmigrationportal.org)*

## Introduction

As conflicts around the world escalate, an increasing number of young people find themselves unable to continue their schooling and face significant barriers to accessing tertiary or postsecondary education. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), **seven** percent<sup>1</sup> of globally-displaced refugees are enrolled<sup>2</sup> in higher education. This compares with non-refugees whose higher education enrollment is on average 42 percent. To address this stark gap, the UNHCR has committed to the “**15by30**” goal of ensuring that 15 percent of refugee students, or approximately 500,000 refugee students in total, are able to pursue higher education by 2030.<sup>3</sup>



While the UNHCR has made progress towards this goal, there is still a long way to go to truly increase access to higher education for refugee students. The failure to do so has immense implications, not only from a humanitarian perspective, but also because sources of global talent will remain untapped even as many countries—particularly in the West—face declining populations and a shrinking workforce.

These emergent needs have been accompanied by shifting geographic impacts and a growth in international saliency and awareness when it comes to the makeup of the refugee student population. While 12 years ago many host countries focused on students fleeing Syria, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine have displaced thousands of

young people, garnering increased attention from many higher education institutions. At the same time, in other parts of the world, the plight of refugee students has continued unabated and without international attention. This paper uses the term “refugee” to encompass a broad range of individuals displaced outside of their country of origin who have fled due to war, conflict, humanitarian crisis, and/or climate or natural disaster.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the clear need for more postsecondary opportunities for all these students, not much is actually known about the numbers, origins, and specific pathways of refugee students who pursue higher education in U.S.-based colleges and universities. Up to now, most refugee students outside the U.S. have arrived in the country as international students on F-1 visas, which makes it difficult to get a comprehensive picture of this population. Less is known about refugee students who pursue postsecondary education in the U.S. through other visa classifications.

Meeting UNHCR’s global goal depends on understanding, first and foremost, who has access to a postsecondary education and what pathways exist to accommodate and support refugee postsecondary students. The U.S. higher education sector does not yet possess the metrics needed to accurately gauge the higher education needs of refugee students and develop responsive institutional capacity. There is an urgent need for more systematic data estimates of refugee student enrollment in U.S. higher education and benchmarking of best practices that serve this student population. In the absence of such information, on-the-ground efforts aimed at increasing postsecondary access and equity for refugee students in the U.S. will remain uncoordinated and isolated. Building our knowledge-base and enhancing cross-campus and cross-sector partnerships will help foster evidence-based advocacy efforts that more effectively address the scale and complexity of the growing humanitarian crisis.

## Establishing a Baseline

With a focus on the U.S. as a receiving and resettlement country, the current paper lays the groundwork for establishing a national-level baseline to better understand the flows of refugee students seeking postsecondary education in the U.S. through the international student pathway (F-1 visa system). The paper also seeks to highlight effective strategies by institutions and organizations to support refugee students to gain access to and thrive on U.S. campuses.

Currently, there is no reliable estimate of how many refugee students are on U.S. college campuses, nor are there consolidated, country-specific effective practices enumerated on how best to serve these students. Our analysis identifies key gaps in data. Furthermore, it uses case studies of U.S. institutions to demonstrate how to welcome more refugee students across U.S. colleges and universities, offering key takeaways for other institutions. Through this report, we aim to:

- **Provide critical context for the call to increase refugee student access, equity, and support** that entities such as UNHCR, Duolingo, the Presidents’ Alliance, and other partners are working to address.
- **Encourage more involvement from U.S. colleges and universities** by raising awareness of the issues affecting postsecondary refugee students.
- **Highlight the power of partnerships** and the institutions that have been leaders in this space.
- **Enable evidence-based, large-scale advocacy efforts** for refugee students that are grounded in an understanding of the scale of the issue.



It is important to understand the different populations and their pathways if we are to establish a comprehensive and accurate future baseline for serving future refugee students on U.S. campuses. Our paper therefore begins with a delineation of **post-secondary** refugee students in the U.S., **with a focus on estimating the number of refugee students included within the population of F-1 international students.**

Next, we examine successful on-the-ground practices at institutions that are opening their doors to refugee students —albeit in small numbers – across the U.S. Given our focus on refugee students who arrive as international students on F-1 visas, we draw upon examples from the [Duolingo University Access Program](#), which provides comprehensive support to academically qualified refugee students interested in studying at universities in the U.S. and elsewhere. We conclude with recommendations for research, practice, and policy.



## Postsecondary Refugee Students in the U.S.

To better enumerate the potential pool of refugee students enrolled or seeking to enroll in postsecondary education in the U.S., we must first understand the different pathways through which these students arrive in the U.S., the barriers and implications that each option presents for their ability to settle permanently in the U.S., and their ability to access and afford higher education.

If we consider **refugee students living outside the U.S. seeking to access higher education and protection**, this overall category can include:

- **Refugees Admitted through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program:** Individuals who are admitted through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (P1-P3 categories). While these individuals enter the U.S. with refugee status, which provides certain benefits and protections, there is no clear education pathway. Resettled refugees are eligible to adjust to legal permanent resident status within one year of arrival, which makes tracking students in this category who are enrolled in postsecondary institutions particularly challenging.
- **Parolees:** Those admitted as humanitarian parolees. Currently, programs exist for specific countries of origin with time-limited protection and no clear education pathway.
- **International Students:** Those who arrive on international student F-1 visas. International students may have been designated a refugee in a first country of asylum before arriving in the U.S. or experiencing displacement. F-1 students must demonstrate that they do not intend to immigrate to the U.S. The status does not provide a durable protection pathway, but an F-1 student already in the U.S. could seek protection through the asylum process. It is possible that students in the U.S. on a non-immigrant visa, such as the F-1 visa, are from countries that have been designated for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or for which Special Student Relief (SSR) has been announced due to emergency situations such as natural disasters, wars and military conflicts, national or international financial crises, and climate.<sup>5</sup> If eligible, international students may seek TPS or SSR if they are in the U.S. at the time of a TPS designation or SSR announcement. However, TPS and SSR are temporary forms of relief and do not offer durable protection solutions.





PATHWAYS	DESCRIPTION	KEY BARRIERS
<b>Resettlement- U.S. Refugee Admissions Program</b>	Refugees are admitted to the U.S. through existing refugee definitions, vulnerability-based resettlement and criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less than 1% of refugees worldwide are resettled</li> <li>• No immediate pathway to education</li> </ul>
<b>Humanitarian Parole</b>	A temporary and discretionary authorization to enter the U.S. for citizens from certain countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited to two years and no path to permanent residence</li> <li>• No immediate pathway to education</li> </ul>
<b>F-1 Visas</b>	The main type of student visa in the U.S. and current avenue for refugees to enter the U.S. as students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to show financial support for the length of the program</li> <li>• Not a durable solution for protection</li> <li>• Limited access to permanent residence and work authorization</li> </ul>

Of the three categories enumerated above, the international student pathway remains the most established route for refugee students to enter the U.S. and is the one for which data is most readily available. In the case of the other two populations, it can be difficult to extract information about those who enroll in postsecondary education. This knowledge gap compromises our ability to build a comprehensive portrait of refugee students on campus.

It is important to note that this potential pool of refugee students coming from abroad does not include the population of refugee, asylee, humanitarian parolee, temporary protected status (TPS), and other displaced migrant students already residing in the U.S. and enrolled in higher education. The Presidents’ Alliance and the Migration Policy Institute reported in an [August 2023 commentary](#) on immigrant-origin students in higher education that an estimated 1.9 million first-generation immigrant students are enrolled in postsecondary education (not including international students on a visa), of whom 56 percent are non-citizens. A portion of these first-generation immigrant students would be categorized as refugee students, but data gaps make it extremely difficult to estimate the number of refugee students among first-generation immigrant students. The data gaps are not unique to the postsecondary sector. Research indicates that no standardized, publicly available educational data is available for refugee, asylee, humanitarian parolee, temporary protected status, or other displaced migrant students at the primary, secondary, or postsecondary level in the U.S., impeding any sort of systematic understanding of the scale of this population and their needs.<sup>6</sup>

With these limitations in mind, we focus the rest of our paper on mapping out the data that currently exists for the refugee student population and reviewing case studies and best practices that apply to this group of students. We also briefly explore ways to gather and report information on other groups of refugee students with limited representation in the current data.



# Estimating Postsecondary Refugee Students: Data Gaps

In general, data on the number of refugee students able to access postsecondary education in their receiving or host country is rare, resulting in an underestimate of the numbers of refugee students that are able to access postsecondary education globally. The critical need for better data on the refugee population enrolled in higher education in host countries has been highlighted by UNHCR, which states that the success of the **15by30 goal**,

“... depends on improved reporting and analysis of refugee tertiary enrollment data. To understand progress towards the goal, the international community, including refugee communities, needs reliable access to application, enrollment, cost and entitlement data across programmes that support refugees to access and meaningfully participate in higher education.”<sup>7</sup>

The 15by30 initiative identifies the need for data and evidence as a major thematic area of focus:



- Global or regional research to build evidence on the impact of refugee higher education on host country economies, national development objectives, sustainable development goals, political economy analysis of inclusive refugee higher education situations, and outcomes of higher education for refugee students and families.
- Provide technical expertise to develop a new data collection methodology underpinning the overall 15by30 roadmap to ensure it is effective, efficient, and fit for purpose.
- Data collection is refined to ensure that refugee scholarships at universities large and small in every corner of the world are counted.

**Goal** →

**Develop a methodology for collecting refugee tertiary education enrollment data that can be implemented in all contexts.**

Adapted from UNHCR 15by30 roadmap: <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/tertiary-education/15-2030-global-pledge-refugee-higher>

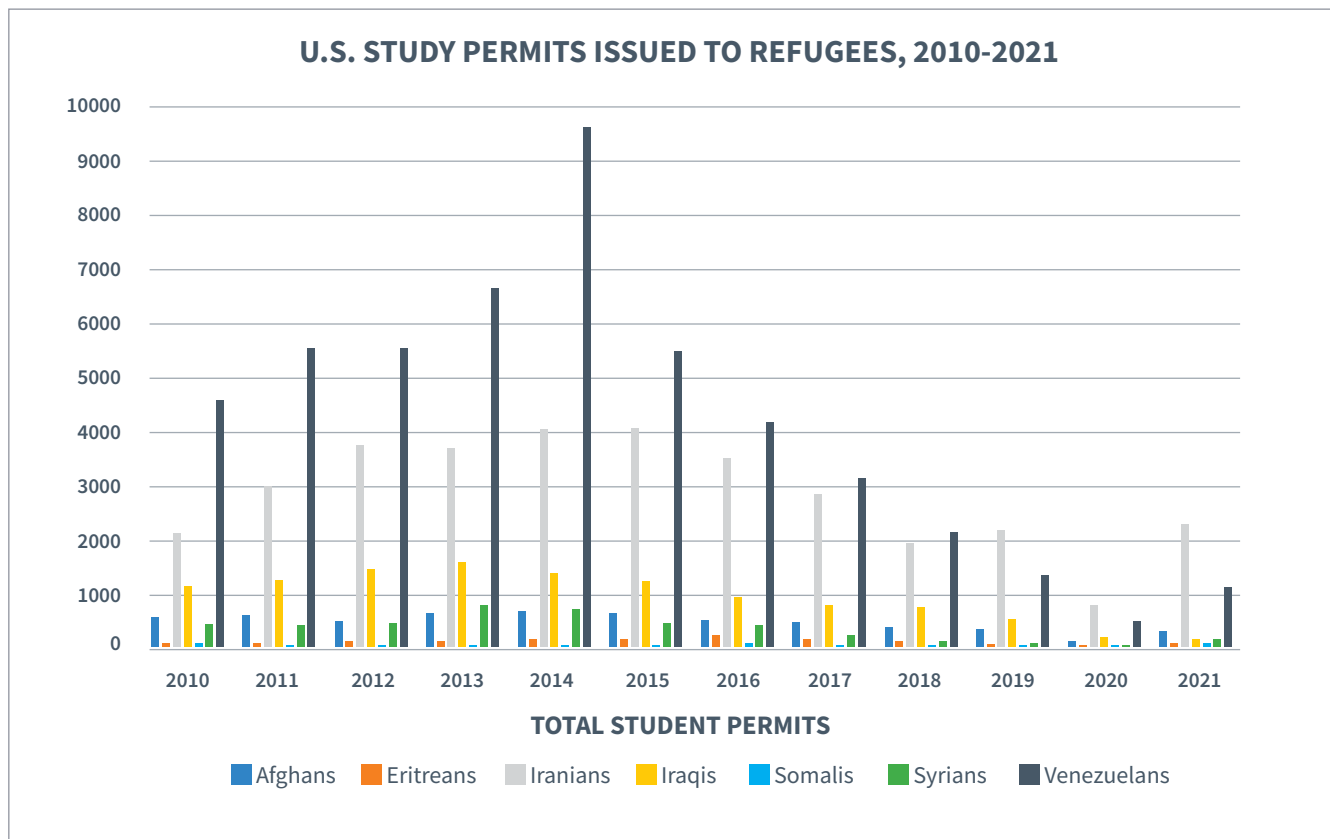
In a 2020 pilot study conducted by UNHCR, sources in 58 countries reported that 96,417 refugees were enrolled in higher education across various pathways in their host nations.<sup>8</sup> Of these, 80,322 were directly enrolled in a higher education institution; the remainder were enrolled through pathways such as the UNHCR tertiary refugee scholarship programme (DAFI), technical and vocational education programs, “connected education” programs, and through third-country pathways. This number is probably a significant undercount, as the global refugee population has continued to grow since 2020 and significant data gaps continue to exist.

## U.S. Data on Refugee Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education

Most refugee students coming from abroad to study at the postsecondary level in the U.S. arrive as international students on F-1 visas, which makes distinguishing them from other international student peers difficult. F-1 student visas are, by legal definition, temporary: students must prove that they are entering the U.S. in non-immigrant status and do not have an intent to immigrate. F-1 students must also demonstrate that they can cover their educational and living costs.<sup>9</sup> Changes are needed to make this pathway relevant and welcoming for refugee students, who now constitute a growing proportion of mobile students. By virtue of their refugee status, many of these students cannot demonstrate an intent to return to their home country. Moreover, they may be dependent on different funding sources to support their educational and living costs, which can make it difficult for them to obtain F-1 visas.

There is no systematic process for gathering and reporting data on refugee students on U.S. campuses, as this information is usually not delineated within broader international student or other institutional data sets. Still, it is worth looking at what information does exist to see if it can inform the development of a baseline for future estimates of the number of postsecondary refugee students in the U.S.

The [OECD-UNHCR Safe Pathways for Refugees survey](#), now in its third iteration, collects information directly from OECD member countries regarding first-time student visas (“study permits”) that are issued. According to the most current data, a total of 107,276 refugee students have been issued student visas (F-1, F-3, M1, M-3) to study in the U.S. over a 12-year period between 2010 and 2021. The numbers peaked in 2014, reaching a high of 16,624, and numbered 4,165 in 2021. However, there is a key limitation to this estimate: the data only captures refugees from seven countries—Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and Venezuela—effectively omitting refugees from all other countries.





*I remember going into grade 12, thinking that my dreams were just dreams and my hopes and goals would never become reality.*

ALIMAS  
DUOLINGO SCHOLAR FROM BURUNDI

Given the limited number of countries of origin included in the OECD data, we supplement the list of countries identified by the OECD with four additional sources: (1) the countries designated for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or for which Special Student Relief (SSR) has been announced (16 countries at the time of writing this report); (2) the top countries of origin of refugees resettled from FY2019-FY2021; (3) the top countries of origin of refugees in 2021 per the UNHCR mandate; and (4) international students in the U.S. who are categorized as stateless. Data for these four sources was obtained from the Open Doors report, an authoritative source of international student mobility data for the U.S. Including these additional sources increases the number of countries of origin from seven to 22. Taken together, international students from these 22 countries and those categorized as stateless can serve as a proxy for the total potential pool of refugee students who are on F-1 visas.<sup>10</sup>



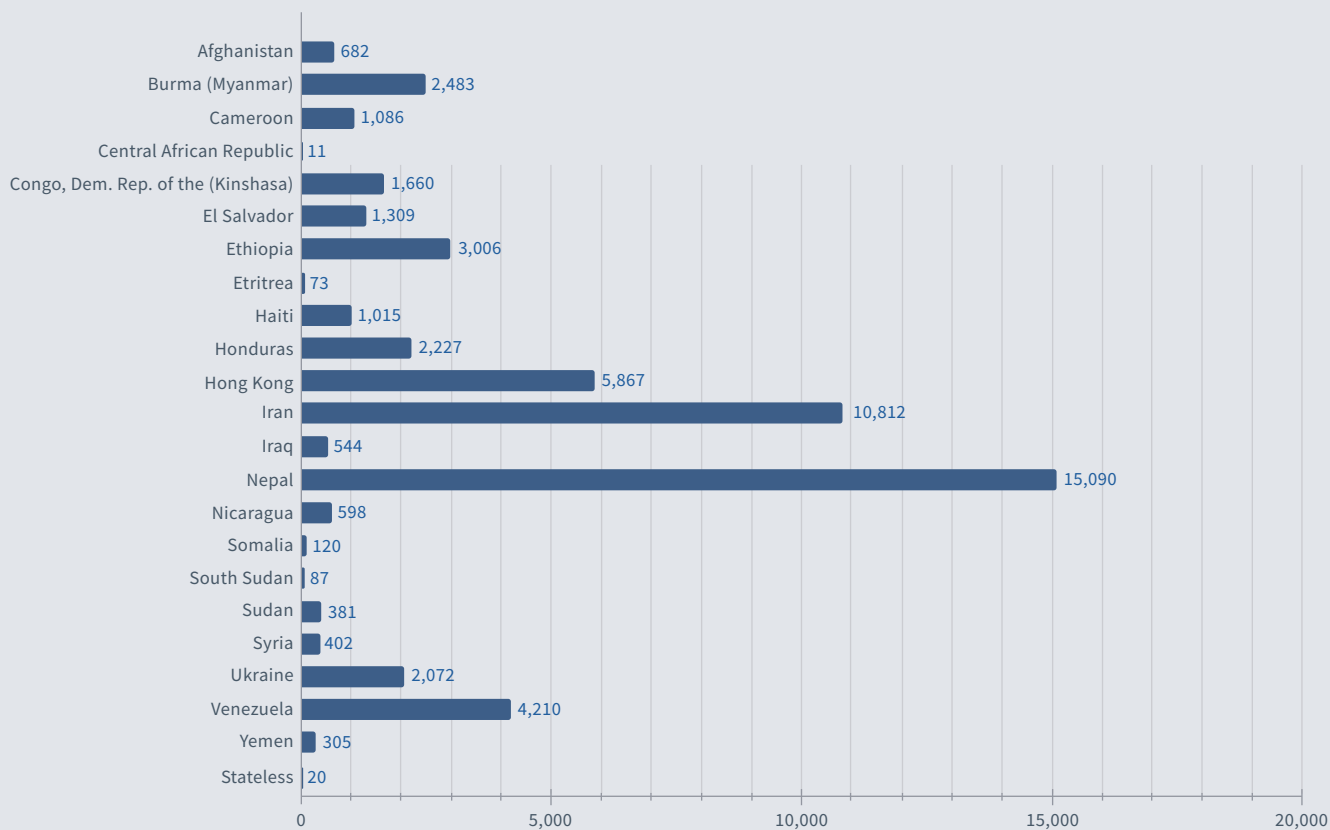
Based on the most current 2022/23 data from Open Doors, we estimate that there were upwards of **54,060** F-1 students in the potential pool of refugee students studying in the U.S. This constitutes approximately **five percent** of the total international student population in the U.S. during the 2022/23 academic year.

While clearly not all students from these countries are refugees or facing displacement, our assumption is that the combination of political upheaval and natural disasters in these areas makes it highly likely that many students from these countries can fall into the category of refugee or displaced. Regardless of their official categorization, it is likely many of these students are facing some amount of strife associated with their displacement.





## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BY PLACE OF ORIGIN



**Source:** The Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange is a comprehensive information resource on international students and scholars at higher education institutions in the United States and U.S. students studying abroad. It is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State with funding provided by the U.S. Government and is published by IIE. For more information, visit [www.opendoorsdata.org](http://www.opendoorsdata.org).

**Note:** Of the 22 countries listed on the chart, seven were included in the OECD-UNHCR study on pathways by refugees (OECD, 2023): Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Venezuela. 16 countries were designated by USCIS for **Temporary Protected Status** (TPS): Afghanistan, Burma (Myanmar), Cameroon, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen. Special Student Relief was announced for 13 countries by DHS, all of which except for Hong Kong (which was designated for Deferred Enforced Departure or DED) also were designated for TPS: Afghanistan, Burma (Myanmar), Cameroon, Ethiopia, Haiti, Hong Kong, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen. Finally, the list includes two additional countries, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which were included in the top countries of origin for **refugees in 2021** per the UNHCR and in data on **resettled refugees from FY19-FY21** collected by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

# Benchmarking Effective On-the-Ground Initiatives

Determining refugee student enrollment in U.S. postsecondary education helps colleges and universities better support this student population and improve access and equity in higher education. Ensuring that the U.S. contributes to meeting UNHCR's global goal requires an understanding of the pathways that exist to accommodate and support refugee postsecondary refugee students<sup>11</sup>, as well as deep consideration of higher education's admissions processes and practices.

The U.S. government recently announced the launch of a new groundbreaking program, [Welcome Corps on Campus](#), which will enable refugee students outside the U.S. to apply to U.S. colleges and universities as first year students and arrive through the US Refugee Admissions Program. Welcome Corps on Campus will enable colleges and universities to sponsor refugee students currently abroad. This program will help increase U.S. higher education access and provide an education and resettlement pathway for refugee students, but the program will take time to grow, and the first students aren't scheduled to arrive until fall 2024. The F-1 visa currently remains the dominant vehicle for refugee students to come and study in the U.S., and many of these students are not able to access the kind of comprehensive support included in programs like Welcome Corps on Campus.

In this section, we offer a case study of a program aimed at providing support for refugee students living outside the U.S. who aspire to pursue study at an American university. Incorporating both scholarships and comprehensive guidance, this initiative represents a crucial step towards improving the prospects of displaced individuals seeking academic opportunities overseas. By examining the participating universities and refugee students, we can develop an understanding of the potential impact of this innovative effort and deepen knowledge about the complexities of the refugee student experience.



**By accessing higher education, highly talented refugee students provide inspiration and hope for all of those following behind them.**

EMMA MCLEAVEY-WEEDER  
LEAD STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT  
EXECUTIVE, DUOLINGO UNIVERSITY  
ACCESS PROGRAM

## Up Close: The Duolingo + UNHCR University Access Program

In 2021, the Duolingo English Test, a digital-first standardized English language test, launched the Duolingo University Access (DUA) Program in collaboration with UNHCR. The initiative seeks to support the UNHCR's 15by30 initiative by helping refugee students access higher education.

Like all refugee students, the Duolingo scholars must tackle challenges beyond those faced by other international students. Duolingo's commitment to empowering refugee students encompasses a comprehensive approach to helping them attain higher education opportunities.





## How the DUA Program Works

The DUA Program partnered with specific UNHCR country operations to find young, academically-qualified refugees who had fled their home countries and were residing in Cameroon, India, Iraq, and South Africa. In its first year the program received 115 applications. Following a comprehensive selection process, 64 finalists were interviewed and 25 Duolingo Scholars were selected.

The Scholars were assigned a dedicated advisor who provided personalized guidance on issues such as university selection, application requirements, essay writing, financial aid opportunities, and travel documents. In addition, the DUA Program offered scholars advocacy and training for the F-1 visa interview with a U.S. consular officer. Securing a visa to study in the U.S. is perhaps the biggest challenge refugee students will face; although it lasts only a matter of minutes, how a refugee student handles this interview directly impacts their chances of studying at a U.S. university.

The DUA Program expects universities that enroll refugee students to cover tuition fees and accommodation. In addition, Duolingo provides each Scholar with gap funding to pay for indirect costs such as flights, winter clothes, computers, immunizations, and visa fees. Most importantly, the program emphasizes the academic excellence and potential of refugee students and the importance of working towards a more receptive environment for refugee students overall.



**We're working to open doors and shine a light on pathways that many other refugee students can follow.**

LAURA KAUB  
ADVISOR, DUOLINGO UNIVERSITY  
ACCESS PROGRAM



**This is an opportunity to make a difference.**

KATHRYN TIMLIN  
SENIOR ASSOCIATE  
DIRECTOR OF  
UNDERGRADUATE  
ADMISSIONS,  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

## The Universities

Over a dozen U.S. universities have enrolled refugee students with the DUA Program. By participating in this initiative, these institutions seek to emphasize the transformative potential of higher education for refugees and the importance of breaking down barriers to education. In addition, they are motivated by the contributions refugee students make to academic discourse and to the societal fabric of a campus community.

In this section, we highlight the experiences of two higher education institutions: Georgetown University and Macalester College. In Fall 2023, Georgetown University enrolled two Afghan Duolingo Scholars from India, while Macalester College accepted a Duolingo Scholar from South Africa who was a refugee student from Somalia. While the two higher education participants highlighted in this section may have greater financial resources than many other colleges and universities, they set an example for what their sector counterparts might be able to achieve with appropriate resources and support.



## Campus Insights

- **Motivation:** Georgetown is driven by a commitment to diversity, not just in terms of geography and socio-economics but also in recognizing the transformative potential of education. They view enrolling refugee students as an opportunity to create a positive impact on the world. Macalester’s motivation stems from a mindfulness of the numerous challenges, both man-made and environmental, impacting students across the globe. A student group had called for better tracking of displaced/refugee/stateless students in Macalester’s applicant pool and those efforts led to a dedicated [webpage](#) to address this student population.
- **Support for refugee students:** Georgetown offers scholarships for students from economically devastated or war-torn areas. Additionally, the university provides a robust support system—originally designed to assist first-generation college students—that includes medical and dental check-ups, airport pick-ups, winter coats, and computers to ensure the success of refugee students on campus. Macalester does not have a dedicated scholarship for refugees but is committed to meeting 100 percent of demonstrated financial need for international students, including those with zero-family contribution. They also leverage their experienced team in international education to meet the needs of displaced international students.
- **Commitment:** Georgetown acknowledges the responsibility of integrating refugee students into an intense academic and competitive environment. It seeks to ensure that they can thrive alongside other students. Macalester is mindful of high-need international students, not just refugees, and provides support to those who require it.
- **Most significant challenges:** The main obstacle for Georgetown is funding. Despite having more financial resources than most schools, they must balance initiatives to enroll refugee students against the recruitment of full-pay students from countries without similar visa challenges. The primary hurdle for Macalester, too, is securing funding and balancing the overall need for full-pay students as a tuition dependent institution. However, there are efforts to identify and address issues on campus that disproportionately impact Macalester’s highest-need students.
- **Reality check:** Both of these DUA Program participants note that while many institutions may want to prioritize access, the reality is that most are primarily focused on meeting their enrollment goals. The limited number of available slots for international students is a significant barrier, especially when there are many deserving candidates.



**What we’re able to do feels like a drop in the bucket. But all you need are just many drops in a bucket to make a difference.**

SARAH PAULSEN  
SENIOR ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF  
INTERNATIONAL ADMISSIONS,  
MACALESTER COLLEGE



**I didn’t think I’d be able to get admission in a country like the United States, especially in a field like computer science.**

ASADULLAH, DUOLINGO SCHOLAR FROM AFGHANISTAN

## The Refugee Students

To better understand their orientation and the role the DUA Program played in their higher education journeys, we interviewed four Duolingo Scholars: three from Afghanistan who had fled to India, and one from Burundi who was living in South Africa.

Three of the Scholars completed secondary education in their home country of Afghanistan, while the student from Burundi finished high school in Durban, South Africa.

One student from Afghanistan learned to speak English after coming to India, while another Duolingo Scholar was a native Swahili-speaker upon arrival in South Africa. The other two already spoke English proficiently when they fled their home countries.

All four students had realized studying abroad could be possible for them by discovering the DUA Program on the UNHCR website. Until then, they had largely dismissed the idea of a university education because the cost of study in the countries where they were living (India and South Africa) was too high. Three students had informally conducted searches about U.S. higher education, but those efforts were largely undirected.

Prior to their acceptance into the program, the interviewed Scholars' college search processes had been either fruitless, or without focus. The DUA advisor first briefed students on the U.S. higher education landscape and the application process overall. Then, through extensive conversations, the advisor helped students identify the areas of study most aligned with their skills and interests and, in turn, their best fit universities, based on factors such as curriculum and culture, as well as the institutions' ability to provide financial support.

## The Biggest Challenge

Undoubtedly, the biggest challenge faced by the Duolingo Scholars was securing an F-1 student visa, a process that involved a high-stakes interview with a U.S. immigration official at the consular office in the refugee student's place of residence. While the interviews only took a few minutes, the anticipatory preparation required of the student, Duolingo, and UNHCR was exhaustive in scope.



**Each step of the process is like another mountain to climb. But my goal is to get my four-year bachelor's degree.**

ALIMAS  
DUOLINGO SCHOLAR FROM  
BURUNDI





The disparities in visa approval rates among students from the Global South—including refugee students from such countries—highlight potential systemic issues substantiated by recent research.<sup>12</sup>



Before the interview, the Duolingo advisor had to ensure each Scholar had the correct travel documents and paperwork to apply for a student visa. The Scholars were prepped extensively for their interviews. They reviewed replies to potential questions, the manner in which they should speak with the officer, the appropriate clothes to wear, and how best to front-load the information they want to convey early on in the brief time allotted to the interview. Because applicants did not know how long the interviews would last, the DUA advisor trained them on how to quickly communicate what the university had accepted them, that they had a full scholarship to attend, and that Duolingo was providing extra support.



**There is deep frustration about the lack of transparency and the unpredictability of the visa process.**

DUOLINGO'S  
MCLEAVEY-WEEDEE

Extensive lobbying occurred behind the scenes, too. Local UNHCR staff provided important advocacy at consular offices in India, Iraq and South Africa, so that immigration officials were more informed. In addition, Duolingo advocated for the Scholars by asking for letters of support from local and national government officials in Pennsylvania, where the company is headquartered.

### **The Outcome**

As a result of their participation in the DUA program, two of these students were accepted by Georgetown University, while one matriculated at UC Berkeley and another to Drexel University. Undoubtedly, these can only be considered outstanding outcomes. **But the fact that it took the effort of a specialized UN agency, scholarships from the country's top universities, the considerable clout of an edtech "unicorn," and the advocacy of local and national government officials to help around a dozen Duolingo Scholars to attain higher education in the U.S. and Canada illustrates the challenges the sector faces. What happens to the millions of refugees who cannot get this kind of support?**



## The Way Forward: The Importance of Doing “The Smart Thing”

“More than being the right thing to do, we really lean into this being the smart thing to do”, says Miriam Feldblum, Executive Director of the Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration.

Higher education must play a more active role in addressing the growing global refugee crisis. **The millions of people who have been displaced due to conflict, persecution and environmental factors require immediate humanitarian action, and universities can provide a way for refugees to not only rebuild their lives, but to contribute to host societies and unlock their full potential.**



**There is not just one barrier for refugees. There are mental barriers that we have to get through to get to the United States. Many of us – maybe all of us – don’t even know that a student can apply to a university and get a scholarship. There’s a lack of awareness.**

RAASHID, DUOLINGO SCHOLAR FROM AFGHANISTAN

For there to be more encompassing strategies to effect true change, we must establish a baseline of data and information upon which to measure and benchmark progress. While the enormity of the crisis is daunting, the collaborative campus initiatives in the U.S. that we have discussed in this paper highlight the vital role higher education can play in aiding the integration of refugees and displaced students. An initiative like the Duolingo University Access Program (DUA) not only creates individual success stories but also underscores the transformative potential of education, showing how barriers can be surmounted, aspirations achieved, and positive change initiated. But despite its clear impact, the DUA program is small in scale and the magnitude of the problem is so large that many more such initiatives are needed to move the needle to increase educational access for refugee students.



While this paper has focused on estimating the number of refugee students arriving in the U.S. as F-1 students and on the DUA program case study, there have been other burgeoning efforts over the past few years to enroll hundreds of displaced students, especially Afghan and Ukrainian students, including those who have arrived as humanitarian parolees or through Special Immigrant Visas (SIV), or as refugees through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).



**This includes:**

- Programs and efforts to enroll and support displaced students from the Asian University of Women, American University of Afghanistan, and elsewhere.
- In Kentucky, an innovative [scholarship program for displaced students](#), including refugees, asylees, asylum seekers, TPS holders, humanitarian parolees, and SIVs, launched and included a required community of practice for the participating campuses.
- The [Higher Ed Immigration Portal](#) features numerous resources and promising practices for campuses seeking to improve refugee student access, equity, and support.
- [Every Campus A Refuge \(ECAR\)](#) created a guide for higher education institutions seeking to welcome and support refugees on campus and to engage surrounding communities on refugee issues. The [AHLAN<sup>13</sup> Manual](#), created based on research conducted by Guilford College faculty and students, provides context on the refugee resettlement process in the U.S. and a toolkit covering an array of topics, including how to find and build a pool of advocates and tools and resources for students, staff, faculty, and administrators looking to map out a refugee “ecosystem” on campus and in the local community.

Recently, the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) funded a consortium, ***Supporting Higher Education in Refugee Resettlement*** (SHERR) to increase campuses’ engagement in refugee resettlement, build cross-sector communities of practice, launch a refugee resource hub on the Portal, and enhance partnerships between campuses, refugee resettlement agencies, and other organizations.<sup>14</sup> SHERR is led by World Learning and includes ECDC, Welcome.US, and the Presidents’ Alliance, evidencing the expansive opportunities to build a robust ecosystem of effective practices and increase institutional capacity. Looking ahead, we offer the following recommendations for research, practice and policy.

## Recommendations for Data, Reporting and Research

- **Define** the specific type of data to be collected, the timing of collection, and responsible parties. Align this data with the information gathered by UNHCR.
- **Advocate** for changes in data collection efforts by organizations already gathering student enrollment, retention, and graduation data.
  - ▶ *Open Doors* should incorporate refugee student tracking questions within overall international student data.
  - ▶ National surveys (such as the CIRP Freshman Survey) and institutional surveys of first year, continuing, and graduating students should incorporate questions regarding students' immigrant-generation status and refugee background to enable institutions and the sector to better understand the access, retention, and graduation rates of students with refugee backgrounds.
- **Collect** data to confirm observed trends and anecdotal reports, such as the assumption that community colleges enroll the majority of refugees due to partnership opportunities.
- **Support** OECD and UNHCR data-related recommendations for postsecondary students at a national level, including disaggregating statistics by sex and age, collecting data on previous country of residence, legal status within that country, and complementary pathways for refugees.

## Recommendations for Policy and Practice

We are heartened by policy advancements to support refugee student access to U.S. colleges and universities and encourage higher education institutions to participate.



With the July 2023 launch of Welcome Corps on Campus, higher education institutions and their communities will be able to support refugee students as private sponsors. This is the first time in U.S. history in which the federal government is institutionalizing and making sustainable programs to welcome refugees on higher education campuses, providing a simultaneous immigration and higher education pathway.

While this is an exciting advancement, this program will take time to grow and does not have the initial capacity to meet the vast number of potentially eligible refugee students, so we need to continue to expand additional pathways.

At the same time, we recognize that these efforts need to complement the local solutions and complementary education pathways for the thousands of young people who will never have the opportunity to seek a safe educational haven abroad.



We offer the following recommendations for policy and practice:

- **Implement** the policy recommendations provided by the Presidents' Alliance to better support refugee students, including policy changes that accommodate refugee students and their specific situations.
  - ▶ Clarify that consular officers should only focus on evaluating the student applicant's immediate intent to enroll as a bona fide student and should be satisfied by an intent to return when conditions in the conflict-affected country of origin are normalized.
  - ▶ Provide alternatives to in-person consular interviews for refugees who live in a country that restricts refugee movement within that country.
  - ▶ Ensure consular officers are familiar with Convention Travel Documents (CTDs) and what rights the CTD provides, particularly the right to return to the country of asylum.
  - ▶ Authorize Special Student Relief (SSR) for students whose home countries are experiencing crises that place the student under financial hardship, necessitating them to take on more work opportunities. This includes providing SSR for any country that is designated Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or Deferred Enforced Departure (DED).
- **Encourage** universities to adapt and tailor institutional best practices to meet the unique needs of refugee students. Troubleshooting at a granular level can yield important results. The DUA Program exemplifies how personalized guidance, financial aid, and university collaboration can empower refugee students to overcome hurdles such as securing a visa.
- **Recognize** the importance of counseling and advising for refugee students, as exemplified by the DUA Program. Explore opportunities to replicate these lessons in other contexts.
- **Connect** with organizations and higher education institutions engaging in the enrollment of refugee students. College access programs, like the DUA program, or third-country pathway programs, like Welcome Corps on Campus, provide opportunities to connect U.S. higher education institutions with talented refugee students. There are also networks and communities coordinated through [Supporting Higher Education in Refugee Resettlement](#) (SHERR) that create opportunities for colleges and universities to connect with each other.



Joint efforts from universities, governments, and organizations can improve education access for displaced individuals, transforming prospects for refugees and their communities alike. In their resourcefulness and dedication, these initiatives underscore higher education's potential to significantly contribute to refugees' resettlement and advancement in the U.S. and elsewhere. By supporting ambitious and driven refugee students, higher education can play a pivotal role in shaping a more inclusive and stable future.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> While the enrollment rate of seven percent is still low, it represents a significant increase from 2019 when the rate of refugee student enrollment in higher education stood at one percent.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR. “UNHCR reports progress in refugee education; tertiary enrollment rate hits 7 percent.” UNHCR Briefing Notes (2023). <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-reports-progress-refugee-education-tertiary-enrolment-rate-hits-7-cent>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR. “15by30 Roadmap - Coming together to achieve 15% enrollment by 2030.” UNHCR (2023). <https://www.unhcr.org/media/15by30-roadmap-coming-together-achieve-15-enrolment-2030-visualized-pdf>

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we adopt the definition used by Martin and Stulgatis (2021) where they define refugees as “all people displaced outside of their country of origin and of concern to UNHCR (refugees after the 1951 Refugee Convention, asylum seekers, stateless people and other populations)” and add to this those who are displaced due to humanitarian crises and natural and climate disasters, which is also grounds for countries being designated for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED).

<sup>5</sup> For more details on requirements for Special Student Relief, see Homeland Security’s Study in the States overview.

<sup>6</sup> Wiseman, Alexander W., and Joel C. Bell. “Education without evidence: Gaps in data availability for refugee, asylee, and humanitarian migrant students in US schools.” *Research in Education* 112, no. 1 (2022): 95-108.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR. “15by30 Roadmap - Coming together to achieve 15% enrolment by 2030.” UNHCR, n.d. Accessed 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/15by30-roadmap-coming-together-achieve-15-enrolment-2030-visualized-pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Martin, Michaela, and Manal Stulgaitis. “Refugees’ access to higher education in their host countries: Overcoming the ‘super-disadvantage.’” International Institute for Educational Planning (UNESCO). <https://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/publication/refugees-access-higher-education-their-host-countries-overcoming-super-disadvantage>

<sup>9</sup> Coordinating Team for the Initiative on U.S. Education Pathways for Refugee Students. *University Sponsorship of Refugee Students: Initiative on Increasing U.S. Education Pathways for Refugee Students* (2021). [https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/effective\\_practice/report-the-initiative-on-u-s-education-pathways-for-refugee-students/](https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/effective_practice/report-the-initiative-on-u-s-education-pathways-for-refugee-students/)

<sup>10</sup> At one time the Open Doors report included a count of refugee students, but this was suspended decades ago. As it currently stands, refugee students are not delineated within the overall pool of F-1, international students.

<sup>11</sup> Coordinating Team for the Initiative on U.S. Education Pathways for Refugee Students, 2021. *University Sponsorship of Refugee Students: Initiative on Increasing U.S. Education Pathways for Refugee Students*, Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2021). [https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/effective\\_practice/report-the-initiative-on-u-s-education-pathways-for-refugee-students/](https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/effective_practice/report-the-initiative-on-u-s-education-pathways-for-refugee-students/)

<sup>12</sup> Bhandari, Rajika, O’Haire, Hilary, Landry, Shelley, and Jill Welch. “The interview of a lifetime: An analysis of visa denials and international student flows to the U.S.” Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (Washington, D.C.). [https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SL\\_23\\_WhitePaper\\_PresidentsAlliance\\_Digital\\_r2-1.pdf](https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SL_23_WhitePaper_PresidentsAlliance_Digital_r2-1.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> *Ahlan* is an Arabic term to express welcome

<sup>14</sup> Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. “New program to mobilize higher education institutions to support refugee resettlement.” Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2023). <https://www.presidentsalliance.org/press/new-program-to-mobilize-higher-education-institutions-to-support-refugee-resettlement/>

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