

NEACAC Make a Difference Fund Governing Board Report

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With the assistance of the NEACAC Make a Difference Fund Grant, I was able to attend the 2nd *Annual Supporting Access to Higher Education for Immigrant & Undocumented Students Conference* at San Diego State University's Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership. The grant funds were able to cover conference registration fees, airfare, hotel expenses, taxis and transportation, and food costs.

At the conference, I had the opportunity to present about the unique situation of African asylum-seeking students living in Lewiston, Maine. Since 2001, the small postindustrial mill town of Lewiston has experienced a rapidly growing population of African immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Located in one of the whitest states in the nation, Lewiston faced a rapid shift in demographics and gained racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and economic diversity. Somali refugees began arriving in Lewiston in 2001. Today, it is estimated that 7,000 Somalis live in Lewiston. In addition, within the past several years, there has been a new wave of immigrants – many of whom are asylum-seekers – from Djibouti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, and Eritrea, among many other African nations. Currently, there are 33 different languages spoken by students in the entire Lewiston public school district. For asylum seeking students, the path to higher education is filled with barrier after barrier, ranging from very limited access to employment, benefits, and healthcare, to ineligibility for federal and state financial aid and many other institutional and external scholarships.

Asylum seekers have been forced to flee their homes due to the exact same reasons as refugees – due to war, destruction, and violence; due to the well-founded fear of persecution based on race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group; due to the fact that he or she cannot safely return home. Whereas a refugee is located outside of the home country and outside of the United States, an asylum seeker is located within the United States (i.e. overstaying a visa) or at a United States port of entry. The process of applying for asylum is lengthy, intricate, and often involves a 4 to 5 year wait - sometimes even longer - that is filled with court dates, intensive interviews, and medical screenings. When one applies for asylum, he or she is granted temporary admission to the United States, but faces severe restrictions in regard to work authorization, access to healthcare, and other government benefits. If asylum is granted, the person is essentially given refugee status in the United States, then required to apply for legal permanent residency after one year, and then can apply for naturalization after five years. If the asylum claim is denied, the person is deported.

My presentation at this conference provided an overview of the history of immigration in Maine and in Lewiston, and an overview of the process of seeking asylum. Specific asylum seeking students were highlighted along with their stories of triumph, defeat, and hope. Barriers to higher education faced by asylum-seeking students, as well as the strategies used to overcome these barriers, and the many efforts being done to increase access to higher education for this very specific, marginalized population were discussed as well. This presentation attempted to spark dialogue and bring light to this population of students in Maine – a very vulnerable population that not many people know exists.

I was also able to attend other sessions and presentations, and learn about the legal rights of undocumented students, what students should do when confronted by ICE agents, and other financial aid resources for undocumented immigrants. More importantly, I was able to discuss and network with educators from the west coast – the majority of conference attendees were from California and Arizona – who have never heard of this population of students living in Maine. It was interesting to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between our populations of immigrant students. I was able to learn strategies and resources to take back to Maine, specifically pertaining to ways I can help my students navigate the complex path to citizenship and the complicated path to accessing higher education.

Asylum-seeking students are often grouped and lumped in with undocumented immigrant students in regard to the field of college access and college admissions, yet they are not quite fully “undocumented,” as they are *legally* residing in the United States and have the *documentation* to prove this. Yet, they are not fully considered to be permanent residents. They are stuck in the middle. They are stuck on the fringes, waiting and waiting and waiting. They are residing here legally and cannot return home, yet face severe restrictions for employment, healthcare, and government benefits. They cannot receive federal or state financial aid. They have very little options for higher education and employment. In addition, some colleges and universities require asylum-seeking students to apply as “international students,” despite the fact that asylum-seeking students are domestic students, legally living in the United States with documentation and attending a secondary school in the United States. Some higher education institutions consider them to be domestic students. Some consider them to be “undocumented” students. It varies greatly from state to state (especially with eligibility for state financial aid) and from institution to institution; there is no uniform consensus as to how asylum-seeking students should be treated or considered as an applicant. Whenever I or one of my asylum-seeking students speak with an admission professional in person, over phone, or via email, the admissions counselors and staff do not know the difference between asylum seeking, asylum granted, refugee status, and legal permanent residency. The same thing often happens when speaking with financial aid professionals. I find this to be extremely troubling.

In writing to the NEACAC Governing Board, I urge NEACAC, NACAC, ASCA, other interest groups, and the wider field of college admission professionals to consider asylum-seeking students as a distinct group, separate from refugee students, separate from undocumented students, and separate from permanent resident students, in regard to college access and college admissions, as they all have extremely unique and distinct situations. Asylum-seeking students need to be

empowered and need a voice, as they have been overlooked in this field. I urge higher education admissions professionals to understand these differences and educate themselves about the nuances in immigration status. Every institution of higher education should become knowledgeable about these distinctions and should have a formal protocol for the admissions process and financial aid eligibility for each type of immigrant status. I also believe that asylum-seeking students should be eligible for federal financial aid and state financial aid. I believe that they should not be considered “international” students when applying to institutions of higher education, as they are legally living in the United States and attending secondary schools here in the United States. Thus, they should not be required to take the TOEFL. If the school is SAT/ACT optional and if the asylum-seeking student has been in the United States for more than a year, I do not think colleges should require them to either take the TOEFL or to submit their SAT/ACT scores – this puts them at a direct disadvantage and linguistic barrier to native English speaking students, as the SAT and ACT have proven to be more difficult for students whose native language is not English.