

## State-Based Policy Supports for Refugee, Asylee, and TPS-Background Students in US Higher Education

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### Résumé de l'article

L'éducation supérieure pour les étudiants déplacés est rarement au centre de la littérature académique aux États-Unis, malgré le fait qu'il y ait 79,5 millions de personnes déplacées à travers le monde en date de décembre 2019 et que 3 millions de réfugiés se soient réinstallés aux États-Unis depuis les années 1970 (UNHCR, 2020). Un nombre estimé de 95 000 Afghans seront réinstallés aux États-Unis en septembre 2022 et le pouvoir exécutif a demandé 6,4 milliards de dollars de fonds au Congrès afin de soutenir ce processus de réinstallation (Young, 2021). Cela représente la réinstallation la plus concentrée aux États-Unis depuis la fin de la Guerre du Vietnam. Il est donc clair que les politiques de soutien aux étudiants déplacés représentent un enjeu urgent d'équité en matière d'éducation. Cet article applique une analyse critique des politiques publiques aux politiques au niveau de l'État soutenant les étudiants déplacés et soutient que les lacunes au niveau des données et le silence politique caractérisent l'état actuel de la situation.





## State-Based Policy Supports for Refugee, Asylee, and TPS-Background Students in US Higher Education

Lisa Unangst<sup>a</sup> , Ishara Casellas Connors<sup>b</sup> and Nicole Barone<sup>c</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Higher education for displaced students is rarely the focus of academic literature in the context of the United States, despite 79.5 million people displaced worldwide as of December 2019 and 3 million refugees resettled in the United States since the 1970s (UNHCR, 2020). An estimated 95,000 Afghans will be resettled in the US by September 2022, and the executive branch has requested \$6.4 billion in funds from Congress to support this resettlement process (Young, 2021). This represents the most concentrated resettlement in the US since the end of the Vietnam War. It is therefore clear that policy supports for displaced students represent a pressing educational equity issue. This paper applies critical policy analysis to state-level policies supporting displaced students and argues that both data gaps and policy silence characterize the current state of play.

### KEYWORDS

critical policy analysis; migration; displacement; tuition; college access; post-secondary education

### RESUMÉ


L'éducation supérieure pour les étudiants déplacés est rarement au centre de la littérature académique aux États-Unis, malgré le fait qu'il y ait 79,5 millions de personnes déplacées à travers le monde en date de décembre 2019 et que 3 millions de réfugiés se soient réinstallés aux États-Unis depuis les années 1970 (UNHCR, 2020). Un nombre estimé de 95 000 Afghans seront réinstallés aux États-Unis en septembre 2022 et le pouvoir exécutif a demandé 6,4 milliards de dollars de fonds au Congrès afin de soutenir ce processus de réinstallation (Young, 2021). Cela représente la réinstallation la plus concentrée aux États-Unis depuis la fin de la Guerre du Vietnam. Il est donc clair que les politiques de soutien aux étudiants déplacés représentent un enjeu urgent d'équité en matière d'éducation. Cet article applique une analyse critique des politiques publiques aux politiques au niveau de l'État soutenant les étudiants déplacés et soutient que les lacunes au niveau des données et le silence politique caractérisent l'état actuel de la situation.

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Higher education for displaced students is rarely the focus of academic literature in the context of the United States, despite 79.5 million people displaced worldwide as of December 2019 and 3 million refugees resettled in the US since the 1970s (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2020). Between 2010 and 2018, 231,253 claimants were granted asylum either affirmatively or defensively (US Department of Homeland Security, 2020a), and an additional 740,000 asylum cases were pending as of 2017 (Meissner et al., 2018). About 45% of all principal applicants for asylum in 2018 were under age 29 (US Department of Homeland Security, 2020b). Further, between 300,000 and 400,000 individuals had been granted temporary protected status (TPS) in 2019 (Catholic Legal Immigration Network, 2019). There is, therefore, a significant grouping of pending and approved asylees, refugees, and TPS holders who might seek to access higher education in the US, yet this population has been the focal point of limited scholarship. Indeed, the small body of work on educational provision for students of displaced background obscures a gap in coordination of relevant policy and services. While this gap is not exclusive to the US, it is notable given the relative wealth and gross enrolment ratio of that higher education system (Khajarian, 2020; Kruczek, 2018; Luu & Blanco, 2019). Here, we define displaced students as encompassing resettled refugees, asylees, and those with a pending claim or holding TPS.

In this article, we address how US state policy centres support for prospective and enrolled displaced students at the higher education level. We do not, however, discuss undocumented migrants who may well have or have had a strong case for asylum or refugee status given appropriate legal representation. While there may be significant

overlap in the experiences of students across these backgrounds, given the relative scarcity of attention paid to education policy and legislation supporting refugees, asylees, and TPS holders, this article seeks to address that gap.

How can US education policy on displaced students be seen in comparison with other more economically developed contexts, which host a minority of the world's displaced people (Ergin, 2020)? The US case is similar to other transnational examples in that, as described by Baker et al. (2018), "despite ... specificities of experience, [displaced students] are not recognised as a distinct equity group" (p. 2) served by a cohesive suite of support initiatives. Rather, they may be incidentally served by various federal and state programs supporting first-generation students, racially minoritized students, English language learners, and so on (Cerney, 2019; Wolfgram et al., 2018).

What sorts of student numbers are we talking about across the states? No comprehensive, reliable data exist on the number of degree-seeking displaced students, a circumstance paralleled in other countries that has been widely discussed and problematized (Ferede, 2010; Woldegiyorgis, 2020). This is due, among other factors, to a combination of variable citizenship statuses, gaps in student tracking between the secondary and tertiary sectors, and (at the tertiary level) voluntary self-reporting of displacement background that has been shown to be unreliable given past experiences of discrimination based on religion, race, ethnicity, and other factors (Kiang, 2000). Numbers of displaced students by state must therefore be triangulated, using as a frame the average global tertiary enrolment among refugees of 3% (UNHCR, 2019). This can be done by combining data sets to look at the number of refugees admitted to the US, the number of asylum cases granted, the number of

asylum cases pending, the number of TPS cases approved and pending, and numbers of resident alien and English-language-learning students in high school and higher education in conjunction with state-level college enrolment among the relevant age cohort. Again, each of these categories is itself fluid, indicating the “flexibility” of data in this area.

In the absence of federal higher education policy, funding, and data centring displaced students, this article considers the extent to which states have filled this particular gap in equitable educational provision. We use as a sample 16 states, culled from the lists of top 10 receiving states on a per capita basis and in absolute numbers, based on data from the Pew Research Center and the US Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (Radford & Connor, 2016; US Census Bureau Population Division, 2018). Further, we focus particularly on tuition policy to demonstrate how displaced students are the main beneficiary or subject of higher education policy levers in only a handful of cases. In the US context, we argue that displaced students experience erasure at the policy level.

## BACKGROUND

There are four main lines of argumentation employed in the area of higher education for displaced groups. These include, first, the student equity argument, which applies various critical lenses to underscore the need for education policy, stakeholders, and institutions to acknowledge a debt of provision (Tuck & Yang, 2014) and to intentionally transform educational processes that have historically excluded minoritized groups on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and other (essentialist) identity markers (Brett, 2014; Korntheuer et al., 2018).

The humanitarian argument, in turn, draws from elements of the United Nations human rights architecture including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in emphasizing obligations to uphold agreed-upon protections among member states and specifically signatories to the relevant agreements (Bhabha, 2002; Inter-Agency, 2001; Willems & Vernimmen, 2018). Further, there is the diplomatic (sometimes elucidated as the security) sub-argument: that educating displaced groups supports the future reconstruction of current conflict states and thereby the prevention of future conflict.

Third, the internationalization at home argument—situated within the larger internationalization literature—calls for attention to international and intercultural populations in any given domestic context. This thread posits that as higher education institutions (HEIs) internationalize in service of quality, income generation, higher rankings, or prestige, students of displaced background in the local community should be understood (variously) as a constituency or client base, as an asset, and as frequently overlooked (Hendrey & McClure, 2017; Hudzik, 2011; Leask, 2015).

A fourth line of reasoning emphasizes the short- and long-term advantages to the host or receiving country accrued by moderately or highly skilled displaced groups; this is the economic argument (Bahar, 2018). At times, authors extend potential impact to the global economic community, arguing that well-educated displaced persons, through their work and remittances, lift standards of living more broadly (Lenette et al., 2019; World Bank, 2019; Wright & Plasterer, 2012).

The limited engagement with questions of displaced student experiences in US higher education requires a consideration of this

scholarship with a global perspective. Further, as higher education institutions (HEIs) and education ministries alike are institutions rooted in histories of racialized exclusion, policy around displacement demands a consideration of the racialized nature of migration. As such, we situate this study within comparative contexts and broader challenges of data and interwoven histories of race in US higher education.

### Higher Education Pathways: Comparative Contexts

Comparative national cases offer a variety of more and less supportive policy approaches. In the European setting, the recent Eurydice report found that 22 national systems reflect “top-level steering documents covering higher education [that] mention asylum seekers and refugees, while an almost equal number (19 systems) say nothing” (European Commission et al., 2019, p. 13). In the German case, identified as the most comprehensive policy approach, “there are a number of actions addressing recognition of qualifications and prior learning, bridging programmes, guidance and counselling services and financial support” that have a “clear budget allocation” (European Commission et al., 2019, p. 13).

More supportive still in terms of raw student enrolment is the Turkish higher education system, which through federal-level policy innovation has initiated new Arabic-language degree programs on the Syrian border and offered both tuition-free status and scholarships to refugee students (a policy so generous that there has been backlash from domestic students) (Ergin et al., 2019). There is a frequent gap between policy supports for approved refugees and asylees and those with pending status; in the Australian context, asylum seekers “are treated as international students and are ineligible for Fed-

eral Government financial assistance programs (Hartley et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2019),” leaving 23 of 43 Australian HEIs to offer stopgap institutional scholarships to “refugees and asylum-seeking students” (Dunwoodie et al., 2020, p. 248). By placing the current research in conversation with global scholarship, the critical exploration of US policy-making is supported.

### Imperfect Data: How Many Displaced Students Are There at US HEIs?

Individuals with histories of displacement enter the US at every life stage. This means that a newly arrived refugee or asylee of traditional college-going age may seek to access higher education shortly after resettlement, or that a childhood arrival may participate in the full K–12 curriculum before pursuing college or university. Further, adults frequently seek additional education and training either to qualify for their current profession in the U.S. context, or to change fields, or to improve their English language skills. Displaced students may have changed their legal status by the time of (or during) higher education enrolment, given that they “may apply for naturalization 5 years after the date of their admission to lawful permanent residence” (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2019, p. 7). Additionally, displaced persons will frequently have moved between school districts and states between resettlement and the pursuit of higher education, meaning that the relevant refugee resettlement data cannot be directly correlated to education enrolment (McBrien, 2005; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016).

Despite these complexities, it is useful to offer a few framing statistics. In recent years, the number of annual refugee arrivals has declined precipitously. Nonetheless, between fiscal years 2017 and 2019, of the 91,015 refugees admitted to the US,



26.5% were from the Democratic Republic of Congo; they represented 46.6% of total admissions in the 2019 fiscal year (Blizard & Batalova, 2019). Between 2016 and 2018, 44% of refugee arrivals were under 17 years of age, and an additional 13.3% were between 18 and 23 years of age (US Department of Homeland Security, 2019). The vast majority of refugees are initially resettled in metropolitan areas—95% based on calculations by the Migration Policy Institute (Singer & Wilson, 2007). Additionally, refugees of the same national background have tended to cluster in particular cities—for example, Cuban refugees in Miami and Iranian refugees in southern California (Singer & Wilson, 2007).

### Patterns of Racism and Racialization in Refugee and Asylee Protection

Policy supporting the resettlement of displaced groups has an entrenched history of racialization specific to the US context, though not exclusive to it (Ficarra, 2017; Gans, 2017). Various processes of racialization have intersected in temporally specific ways with politically expedient religious hierarchies, patriarchy, and other systems of exclusion in the granting of legal protection (Hua, 2010). As such, consideration of higher education policy for displaced learners must be situated both in racialized histories of migration as well as the racialized nature of immigrant identity development.

Histories of immigration inform this conversation. In the period between 1945 and 1965, “there was no legal distinction between a refugee and an immigrant; any refugee who was admitted into the United States entered under the quota for his or her country of origin” (Brown & Scribner, 2014, p. 104). The Chinese Exclusion Acts still applied to individuals seeking protection, with limited admissions approved for politi-

cal asylees from China following Communist takeover in 1949 (Lau, 2006, p. 18). Hampton (2017) has discussed the racialization and sexualization of the Cuban women granted asylum following the Mariel boatlift of 1980, noting that this racialization process was largely undifferentiated from that applied to other Latina immigrants (p. 1087). This point echoes the argument made by cross-disciplinary scholars that legal status (“documented” immigrant, “undocumented” immigrant, refugee, asylee, etc.) is itself a construct, but with real consequences for lived experience (Oliveira & Kentor, 2020; Vigil & Abidi, 2019). In recent years, Syrian refugees have encountered new racialization following their arrival that has directly threatened their “approved” refugee status (Gowayed, 2020).

The extent of immigrants’ racialized experience has been explored by immigration scholars as well as race scholars. While historically, narratives of immigration considered pathways to assimilation (Feagin & Cobas, 2008), the aspiration of assimilation has been questioned, highlighting the ways that assimilation hinders mobility (Rumbaut et al., 2006). Nonetheless, it is evident that different groups face differing pathways. Scholars of race contend that race places a central role in the assimilation of non-white immigrants (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). While racial and ethnic identity among immigrants may be fluid, data considering immigrant identity have also illustrated how being white is seen as necessary with perceptions of being American (Sorrell et al., 2019). As such, processes of racialization are by no means exclusive to the US, though they are distinct given the specificities of American colonialism and policy structures. Additionally, regionally specific processes of racialization impact the resettlement experience of displaced persons across

the US (Guerrero, 2016), thus maintaining a salience for their everyday lives.

### Conceptual Framework

We approached this article with critical policy analysis (CPA) as our operative conceptual framework (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Chase et al., 2014). CPA seeks to move beyond a value-neutral linear consideration of policy to address the messiness of policy-making. Put alternatively, "policy analyses are constructed as discursive practices that create, share, and produce truth claims that can be questioned" (Hernández, 2013, p. 51). Through this application, CPA disrupts traditional policy analysis tools in favor of illuminating the policy problems and solutions that a policy constructs. As a result, this framework helps explore policy as the practice of power to centre "attention to hidden assumptions or policy silences and unintended consequences of policy practices" (Allan, 2009, p. 24) In doing so, it has the power to uncover or illuminate how policies serve to (re)produce inequity. As such, CPA is an ideal tool for considering both a policy-rich and policy-thin environment as we encountered in our data collection. As we outline below, the findings elucidated here largely reflect an absence of state-based education policy centring displaced students. The policy that does exist provides for their higher education incidentally. Given this paucity of relevant policy, we engaged CPA to frame the landscape of state-based education policy serving displaced students with a focus on the meaning that can be made from these loud policy silences.

## METHODS

### Sample

Given the decentralized nature of US higher education, which includes a high level of state policy control, we focused on policy discourse at the state level. The sample for this study merges states that were ranked top 10 in either per capita or absolute numbers in terms of refugee resettlement in 2016 and 2018 (Radford & Connor, 2016; US Census Bureau Population Division, 2018). This grouping of 16 states represents a purposive sample, one that we hypothesized would represent the most "policy-rich" environments of all state cases.

### Data Collection

Given the focus of this study on public higher education within each state context, our data collection utilized a multipronged approach to support a nuanced understanding of the discourse surrounding displaced students. For each state, we identified the relevant state agency or coordinating board. For several, this included multiple agencies with authority over different segments of the public higher education system. For example, in California, we reviewed the state board of higher education, the California Community College Board, the California State University System, and the University of California System. These reflect the spectrum of public HEIs across the state.

To complement the data collected from state higher education agencies, we also gathered data from key institutional contexts, for example, we evaluated whether the University of Minnesota's admissions website indicated institutional aid serving displaced students as an addendum to other state and federal funding pools. Finally, we sought to further triangulate the data by reviewing information collated by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association and the

uLead Network associated with the University of Michigan National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good (Carlson, 2013; uLead Network, 2020).

Research team members each researched specific state contexts and utilized online searches to gather relevant data. The search terms **refugees, asylee, asylum, temporary protected status (TPS), immigrant, and displaced** were used. The research team discussed preliminary findings to identify similarities and dissimilarities, followed by a secondary review with an explicit focus on tuition policies. In addition to documenting what was included, it is important to note what was excluded: news or stories that discussed displaced students without mention of policy or program. Further research might well probe the content of, for example, community-based admissions initiatives tailored for displaced students or university publications featuring institutional alumni from displaced backgrounds who chart their course through higher education in narrative form (Hartley et al., 2018; Sontag & Harder, 2018; Unangst, 2020).

## FINDINGS

As previously observed, a single comprehensive data set regarding the enrolment patterns of displaced students does not exist. Understanding the context of public tuition and financial aid, linked to the largest site of enrolment for students in US higher education, provides a lens through which post-secondary access can be understood. The methods outlined above sought to uncover the ways in which displaced students are considered within tuition policy. Vitality, we note the modes in which other historically oppressed and excluded student populations are conflated to produce an omnibus category of students with differing immigration

status. While undocumented students are often referenced as interchangeable “policy subjects” with refugee/asylee/TPS students, their experiences and access to in-state tuition and financial aid should not be presented as identical. To that end, the findings outlined below focus explicitly on the ways that refugee, asylee, and TPS students are addressed. Building on prior CPA scholarship, we centre the importance of policy silence. The findings begin by drawing attention to these silences, which we argue manifest in the relative erasure of these students from state policies. Second, to illustrate the fragmented approach to state-based policy, and to probe the few standout state contexts where supportive policy mechanisms are in place, we chose to focus on a narrow subset: tuition policy.

### Characterizations of Displaced Students Within Public Policy

Overwhelmingly, sample states do not highlight specific policies, programs, or structures that support displaced students. Instead, policy documents are most likely to discuss how these learners should be enumerated within state-level reports, specifying how quantitative data position refugee, asylee, and TPS students. Many states instruct public institutions to categorize these learners using non-resident alien (NRA) status, which obscures the legal, linguistic, and racialized identities of these individuals and has a number of implications. The NRA category captures “a person who is not a U.S. citizen or national, is in this country on a visa or temporary basis, and does not have the right to remain indefinitely” (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021, p. 43). As such, students with a wide range of backgrounds, including international students, refugees, and those with pending status, are captured in this broad categorization. Further, NRA “iden-



tity" serves as an alternative to race, thereby erasing all racial identification, a factor that scholarship (Harper et al., 2009) has identified as salient in pursuing US higher education.

Several notable exceptions to this policy vacuum can be identified. In 2020, the California Community College System launched a \$5 million fund supporting additional institutional efforts to engage refugee students (Weber, 2020). Further, it is clear that while in some cases, individual HEIs or systems have supplemented an absence of supportive policy in this area—the City University of New York is a good example (2020)—others have developed policy that reinforces the racialization of displaced groups (North Dakota State University, 2020).

### Centring Displaced Students in Tuition Policy

#### *Tuition Policy for Approved Asylees/Refugees*

Overwhelmingly, these 16 states provide approved refugee and asylee students access to in-state tuition (outlined in Table 1). However, the time when students are able to access to these in-state rates represents both an important distinction and potential barrier to access. While almost all states have a 12-month residency requirement to access in-state rates—Arizona (for approved refugees) and Minnesota being the exceptions—the literature demonstrates that time-to-access following secondary school completion is a barrier to higher education attainment (Perna & Smith, 2020). Further, some states require that following 12 months of residency, students produce documentation to demonstrate their eligibility for in-state tuition. Similar bureaucratic hurdles have been shown

in the transnational literature to inhibit student success (Lambrechts, 2020; Subasi et al., 2018).

#### *Tuition Policy for In-Process Asylees/Refugees*

The asylum process can be protracted; thus, a requirement for a student to have approved asylee/refugee status embeds the hidden consequence of exclusion. A few states provide a mechanism for pursuing in-state tuition regardless of approved or in-progress status. Examples of policy that advance inclusion for this population exist within the SUNY system and the Illinois State system. However, these systems are the exception rather than the rule, indicating that most learners will have to wait until their claim is adjudicated by the courts—often a years-long process (Kanstroom, 2019; National Immigration Forum, 2018)—until they can begin the process of being approved for in-state tuition.

#### *Access to In-State Tuition*

These data speak to decentralized policies around in-state financial aid and, from the perspective of the student, the often-ambiguous nature of higher education costs. Which states might be "best" for a refugee or asylee to settle in if they were interested in pursuing a college degree? At present, no centralized information frames this key question. Further, while we have focused on in-state tuition policies, we note that by no means is the availability of in-state tuition a guarantee of college affordability. Indeed, our findings expand and build upon a well-established body of literature in this area (De Angelo et al., 2016; Yasuike, 2019).

**Table 1***Tuition policies for displaced groups among top 16 US states in refugee resettlement on per capita and absolute basis*

State	Absolute/ per capita top 10?	In-state tuition for approved refugees/asylees?	To “pending” refugees/asylees/TPS holders?	Are there clear forms of state aid for displaced students?
Arizona	Both	Yes	No	No
California	Absolute	Yes	Yes	For undocumented students
Idaho	Per capita	Yes	Yes; conditional asylee status is accepted per one institution’s website	No
Illinois	Absolute	Yes	Yes; they must submit documentation that they will apply for permanent residency but then they are eligible for in-state	Yes
Kentucky	Both	Yes	No	-
Maine	Per capita	Yes	Unclear	No
Michigan	Absolute	Yes	Not clear, but impression is that not holding approved status would mean requirements couldn’t be fulfilled	No
Minnesota	Both	Yes	Yes for pending asylees if residency requirement met	Yes
Nebraska	Per capita	Yes	Unclear, but perhaps could use same process as undocumented students if they had been resident in-state for 3+ years	No
New York	Absolute	Yes	Yes (includes TPS and “application pending” status)	Yes

*Continued on next page*

Table 1 continued

State	Absolute/ per capita top 10?	In-state tuition for approved refugees/asylees?	To “pending” refugees/asylees/TPS holders?	Are there clear forms of state aid for displaced students?
North Dakota	Per capita	Yes, for refugees who meet residency requirement; no information on asylees	No clear information, so no?	No
Ohio	Absolute	Yes	Yes, if most recent immigration status prior to entering pending status was an eligible status	No
Pennsylvania	Absolute	Yes	No	No
South Dakota	Per capita	Unclear	Unclear	Unclear
Vermont	Per capita	No	No	No
Washington	Both	Waivers and reductions available	Yes, with an approved residency immigration status and have met residency requirement	Yes, for undocumented students who qualify under HB 1079

**Note.** TPS = temporary protected status; FAME = Financing Authority of Maine; INS = Immigration and Naturalization Service; SUNY = State University of New York; UW = University of Washington; HB = House Bill.

Whereas the US higher education literature has long identified the challenges facing students from lower socio-economic strata, a small minority of those whom may receive something approaching full aid, for most learners who pursue public higher education, tuition policies are what continue to make or break their pursuit of a degree. Further, as we argue here, for a subset of these students, existing financial aid resources cannot be utilized: displaced students are erased from relevant state policy. Inability to access data, which may be complicated by various structural barriers, has likely contributed to a “data vacuum” experienced by state policymakers who might otherwise act on this pressing equity issue. This vacuum impacts most often learners who, in the US setting, will be racialized, could be eligible for a Pell grant under different circumstances, and use English as their second, third, or fourth language.

## DISCUSSION AND INDICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

### Implications for Policy and Practice

CPA highlights the importance of centring written policy, as well as what is missing: policy silences, which were notable among these 16 state contexts. We have argued previously that the lack of accurate data on both how many displaced students might be attempting to access higher education and how many are actually enrolled inhibits the development of policy and practice centring these students and supporting their attainment and success. One state context that illustrates this is Maine, where the largest city, Portland, estimated in 2016 that 30.7% of all immigrants in that city and surrounding communities were refugees and that their median household income was \$21,400, lower than the federal poverty level for a

family of four (Portland Regional Chamber, 2016). This signals that displaced student success might be well captured by statistics on attainment of lower socio-economic status student groups; “economically disadvantaged Maine students are much less likely to go to college than their higher-income peers ... from 2008 to 2013, the gap rose from 21 to 24 percentage points” (Plimpton et al., 2014, p. 3). It is also notable that 60.9% of “likely refugees” in Portland were categorized as naturalized citizens, meaning that they would not be captured by the NRA category (Portland Regional Chamber, 2016). In both Portland and Lewiston, upwards of 60% of students enrolled in K–12 education have been identified as students of colour, with many students likely from immigrant or displaced backgrounds (Findlen Leblanc, 2017). In 2019, Lewiston, whose population is 10% Somali, saw its K–12 schools enrol “about 1,400 English language learner students out of a total school population of around 5,600. The primary languages for those students [were] Somali followed by Portuguese and French” (Ohm, 2019). This data snapshot highlights the large body of learners who may be excluded by the lack of policy and data collection practices that distinguish refugee, asylee, and TPS status.

While capturing self-identified citizenship data presents significant implementation challenges in ensuring that these data are not used to punitively target students in certain socio-political contexts, the ability to enumerate or better characterize displaced populations must be a priority of policymakers. Without this data, policy-makers will continue to obscure their existence within higher education, thus avoiding the need for policy supports. Successful support of the spectrum of displaced students in the US context might also inform the scaffolding of students in other post-colonial settings,

where (nationally specific) amalgamations of racism, xenophobia, and other oppressors distinctly impact learners and may affect their engagement with democratic processes in both the host and sending counties.

### Implications for Future Research

The gap in scholarship around displacement, despite the reality that individuals 24 years or younger make up the majority of refugee and asylee seekers each year, marks a significant omission in higher education's broader equity agenda. Further, with the majority of refugees over the last several years immigrating from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, implications for the intersection of immigration status and racial identity serve to further complicate how scholarship and practice situate displaced students. Within the limited data available, state and institutional research is necessary to enhance an understanding of how policies are in fact supporting these populations. Future research may take on questions of how institutions address the limited state and federal policy landscape in order to cultivate institutional policies and practices that are supportive of displaced students. Further, by engaging with community colleges that serve large proportions of displaced students, further research may begin to quantitatively unpack the composition of these learners who have enrolled in higher education. While refugees have long been a site of inquiry within other national contexts, their erasure and overall essentialization within US higher education highlights the need for continued empirical scholarship that centres refugee students.

We would be remiss not to mention that several HEIs are using more and less resource-intensive support programs and policies for prospective and enrolled students alike. The [University of Buffalo \(2019\)](#) shares fact sheets for family and friends in 16 languages,

including those of local refugee populations. Pima County Community College (Arizona) maintains the Pima Immigrant and Refugee Student Resource Center, which has partnered with an area nonprofit to offer a Syrian & Somali Pop-Up Souq, described as "a great opportunity for Tucson's communities to meet each other and share culture & connection" ([Pima Immigrant and Refugee Student Resource Center, 2019](#), para. 4). The Middle Eastern Studies Department at the University of Texas at Austin operates a mentorship program in partnership with the local public school district: "What started as a small program in just one school quickly grew into a volunteer program with over 50 UT students working with Arabic, Persian and Pashto speaking students at 16 AISD schools, from kindergarten through twelfth grade" ([University of Texas at Austin, 2020](#), para. 1). These emerging good practices point the way forwards for peer institutions.

### CONCLUSION

[Wasem \(2020\)](#) has written of the near-contemporary US that "what distinguishes Donald Trump's anti-immigrant stance today from the past is that no successful or aspiring president has ever made opposition to the admission of refugees and asylees a centerpiece of their platform" (p. 246). The present higher education landscape, then, confronts not only a global health crisis reshaping the delivery of education but also continued disinvestment, a politically antagonistic environment, and the largest global displacement crisis since 1945. There is broad consensus that already-marginalized student groups are being particularly impacted by the events of 2020 through the present. This includes displaced groups, which, as we have demonstrated here, are ill-served by current



policy in the states in which refugees have concentrated.

One key distinction between the US approach and comparative policy frameworks is that tailored admissions processes serving at least some displaced groups and higher education on a tuition-free basis are present in countries with primarily public higher education systems including Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands, among others. These supportive approaches are not exclusive to more economically developed contexts: Brazilian federal-level initiatives indicate the right of asylum seekers and refugees to access higher education (de Wit et al., 2020). Such measures are absent in the US, where most students attend public HEIs that charge substantial fees even at the in-state tuition rate. In practical terms, displaced students, whether prospective or enrolled, encounter myriad institutionalized barriers even in “policy-rich” contexts and indeed find support through various cross-sector initiatives and actors. However, the point remains that the US is distinct among more economically developed countries in its absence of active policy in this area.

As elaborated by Williams et al. (2014), “a retelling of American higher education history can be accomplished only by simultaneously retelling the nation’s history” (p. 417)—the national landscape of refugee and asylee settlement is inextricably linked to contemporary and historical higher education policy initiatives that have been explicitly and implicitly guided by racist and exclusionary goals, which has directly affected student access and experience. Rightly, much attention has been paid to the need for policy and institutions to pay heed to equity, including a revisioning of equity beyond racial diversity. Not included among the “equity groups” typically considered are displaced students; they are served incidentally, if at all. We

draw attention here to the corrugated landscape of higher education policy serving displaced students and call for both urgent action on the part of policy actors as well as increased research in the field. Where is the lobby for this group, a lobby similar to those coalitions that have emerged to support the targets of recent federal policies such as the “travel ban” or the proposed directive to block international students from US HEIs? Displaced students are perhaps in a liminal state—racialized and yet excluded from mainstream equity narratives (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Unangst, 2020; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003). We call for change.

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