

One Refugee: Supporting Students from Refugee Backgrounds

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Students from a refugee background resettled in the U.S. face a number of challenges in accessing higher education. This effective practice provides an overview of One Refugee (1R), a nonprofit organization based in Utah, that has made a positive impact on the lives of hundreds of college students from a refugee background. 1R provides students with academic mentoring, professional development, and financial assistance to help them access higher education opportunities in the U.S. 1R serves as a case study for other programs interested in helping students from a refugee background. These programs could potentially benefit from emulating the approach One Refugee has taken.

History of One Refugee

1R was developed out of the realization that only a small portion of the refugee population is able to access and succeed in obtaining higher education. The challenges resettled refugees in the U.S. face in preparing for collegiate level studies are complicated. Beyond a degree, progress towards a fulfilling and meaningful career is difficult to traverse while navigating social integration as well as emotional and financial burdens. 1R saw the need for clear and lasting impacts that would help foster growth and prosperity in these young adults and believed that education would give them the best chance for success.

Barriers Students from Refugee Backgrounds Face

Young college students from a refugee background typically fall into two disparate categories: single individuals who live on their own and students who live at home with their families.

Students living on their own face challenges that often include working multiple jobs or taking on extra hours to pay for education and living expenses, which greatly limits time and energy that could be spent on studies. The students who are still living at home generally come from households where the parents lack basic language and job skills that would make them more employable, often resulting in the students being the primary breadwinners and working to financially support their family members (both in the United States and abroad).

Regardless of the living situation (and duration of time living in the United States), students from a refugee background can encounter complex challenges stemming from limited English-speaking abilities. Preparing for collegiate studies often sheds light on reading and writing deficits. In addition, the higher education system can be difficult to navigate, and guidance (e.g., academic advising, professional development) may not always be easily accessible.

With few informal networks to explore career opportunities, direction can be difficult for students nearing graduation or seeking internships to gain valuable experience. Students may find themselves struggling to enter their field of study with limited experience and resources.

Other barriers students from a refugee background face include: mental health from current or past trauma, lack of financial resources, familial and cultural strain as children adapt more quickly

to local cultural norms than their parents, and lack of confidence in academic and professional settings.

1R's Program (services and expectations)

1R provides students who come from refugee backgrounds the support needed to obtain an education and develop concrete professional goals to build meaningful careers and futures.

1R focuses its efforts in three main categories:

- Mentorship
- Professional development
- Financial assistance

Mentorship

1R students are assigned a 1R Education Manager who meets with them regularly, assesses needs, provides resources and helps them to develop an education and career plan. The Education Manager meets at least once a month with students to follow up on plans, check on academic progress, and provide opportunities for growth. Students are referred to resources on campus to assist them in their success. These resources include tutoring, financial aid, and academic advising.

Professional Development

1R students work on professional development, including developing a professional resume, career exploration through informational interviews and job shadowing, and interview preparation and professional communication. Their Education Manager alerts them to professional development opportunities (many of them run by 1R), including networking events, job shadowing, informational interviews, and internships.

Financial Assistance

1R provides a last-in scholarship that typically covers the remaining balance of students' tuition after government financial aid and other scholarships. 1R also financially assists with the cost of books, a laptop, eyeglasses, emergency dental care, mental health services, and emergency housing.

1R students must meet specific requirements to be eligible for assistance. The student must be from a refugee background, take a full-time course load, maintain satisfactory academic progress (a minimum of a 2.5 GPA), work part-time and meet monthly with their Education Manager. Students who are college-ready and have a career-focused objective for their education are provided the proper guidance and support needed for their success.

Partnerships

1R has partnered with higher education institutions and businesses to expand support in education and career services. This support includes professional development opportunities that equip students with the necessary connections and skills to be employable upon graduation. These partnerships promote a relationship that benefits both students and organizations. Local companies are beginning to see the benefits (including high retention rates and learning

opportunities for their workforces) that comes from hiring individuals from a refugee background.

1R also partners with community resources in the areas of mental health, citizenship, and healthcare to provide 1R Scholars with what they need to succeed in higher education.

1R works closely with community colleges and universities. 1R partners with many departments and institutions including the financial aid office, the bookstore, academic advising, career services, and counseling. Below is the list of colleges and universities that 1R is currently working with:

Idaho

- Boise State University
- College of Southern Idaho
- College of Western Idaho
- University of Idaho

Utah

- Brigham Young University
- Ensign College
- Davis Technical College
- Salt Lake Community College
- University of Utah
- Utah State University
- Utah Valley University
- Weber State University
- Western Governors

Outcomes

1R has set clear parameters around assistance and expectations. 1R continues to focus its efforts on one-on-one support, and professional development has become a cornerstone for realizing the success of graduates. One-on-one meetings are now conducted monthly with the support of Education Managers, so needs and goals can be realized through progress plans.

Since 1R's inception in 2014, 299 students from a refugee background have graduated from college with support from 1R. The average salary of these graduates is \$48,000/year (USD), which is \$18,000 more annually than the equivalent for high school graduates (both refugee and non-refugee). 70% of 1R graduates are professionally employed.

One Refugee measures impact by evaluating three outcomes: feeling a sense of connection to their community, being capable of living in financial security, and being in a professional career with opportunity for growth.

With an increase in income-earning potential, graduates create a positive impact on future generations and help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Many students and graduates volunteer their time and experience, whether it's educating local communities or providing direct care back to their former countries or refugee camps. Graduates average 3+ hours per month in their respective communities. 1R graduates are working in almost every industry in both Utah and Idaho. These graduates also empower future generations as tangible examples of the power of education.

As for current students, 1R has grown by accepting 127 new students in 2021, bringing the total number to 365. Current 1R students have an average GPA of 3.3.

Looking to the Future

1R remains focused on ways to best serve college students from a refugee background. Processes will continue to be refined, and professional development opportunities will continue to be realized thanks to meaningful partnerships. 1R currently serves 365 students at 16 institutions throughout Utah and Idaho.

Where corporate partners already have a physical presence, collaboration allows the possibility of scaling One Refugee's model into other states, allowing the reach of service to go beyond Utah and Idaho. With additional funding, 1R can scale services to new locations.

For additional information on 1R, visit www.onerefugee.org. If you're interested in learning more about 1R, please contact info@onerefugee.org.