

Supporting Higher Education in Refugee Resettlement

Building the capacity of colleges and universities to support resettlement.

Engaging with Refugee Resettlement through Student Service-Learning and Volunteering

A Resource from the SHERR Community of Practice and Action* “Service-Learning and Volunteer Engagement”

Introduction: This guide presents tips, ideas and perspectives for diverse stakeholders seeking to begin or expand student service-learning and volunteer initiatives and programs that support student engagement with refugee resettlement. Throughout the guide we emphasize partnership and collaboration between campuses and resettlement organizations. The document is divided into three sections:

- 1. Context and Mutual Benefits – for Campuses, Students, Resettlement Agencies, and Refugee Clients*
- 2. Tips for Resettlement Agencies and Higher Education Institutions*
- 3. Focus on Service-Learning/Community Engaged Learning*

1. CONTEXT AND MUTUAL BENEFITS – FOR CAMPUSES, STUDENTS, RESETTLEMENT AGENCIES, AND REFUGEES

In FY 2024, the U.S. welcomed a historic number of refugees, over 100,000 individuals, prompting an urgent need to expand the capacity for refugee resettlement in communities across the U.S. U.S. colleges and universities hold vast potential to support that expansion in ways that benefit not only refugees but also students, resettlement agencies, and campuses themselves. College and university students generally have the time, energy, and motivation to serve; refugees and resettlement processes provide a unique opportunity for students to do so. The graphic below shows some of the benefits of student service initiatives for each of these stakeholder groups. Even if the numbers of refugee arrivals decrease, global displacement will continue to be a key challenge for our world and therefore it is essential for colleges and universities to create opportunities for students to connect with displaced individuals. Building meaningful connections between students and refugees promotes understanding of critical issues and what it means to be a welcoming community.

Benefits to Colleges and Universities	Benefits to Resettlement Agencies
• An attractive experiential learning opportunity • Mission-aligned community-based learning and connection to local community • Opportunity to understand a diversity of lived experiences • Opportunity for deeper conversations and synergies around global migration	• Opportunity for improved services through contribution of campus resources and capacity (people/volunteers, space, funds, research skills, etc.) • Co-sponsorship and housing • Partnerships may expand resettlement organizations’ capacity and resources to support clients beyond the first 90 days • Possible long-term or recurring partnerships

Benefits to Students	Benefits to Refugee Clients
• Better understanding of global issues and cultural responsiveness • Opportunity for students to build professional/job skills, including confidence to problem-solve, improve language skills, learn about immigration processes in the U.S., and develop a professional network • Fostering human connections • Opportunity to meet service-learning or internship requirements, if applicable	• Opportunities to expand refugees' social capital and connect with peers • Opportunity to connect with the campus as a potential employer • Making campus feel like a welcoming and attainable environment; Refugee clients who connect with campuses through such programs are more likely to enroll their children or themselves in academic programs.

Examples of Student Service-Learning Engagement with Refugee Resettlement

There are many ways that students can and are connecting and volunteering with refugee resettlement. Below is a brief overview of some approaches:

- **Class-based:** Specific courses designed intentionally to incorporate service-learning or community engaged learning with refugee resettlement. This could mean, for example, a specific project; working directly with refugee clients; or engaging in a research/resource development project.
- **Alternative Spring Break:** Groups of students have completed a week of volunteering and learning about refugee resettlement over a school break. This could be conducted locally or with travel to another community.
- **Student Organizations:** There are student groups on campus that coordinate volunteering with local refugee resettlement agencies or support organizations.
- **Internships and Fellowships:** Students can complete internships or fellowships by serving at a local resettlement agency.
- **Work Study:** Federal Work Study requires at least 7% of work study positions to be in community positions. The cost can be shared with the community organization or can be paid 100% by the college or university. See some examples from [University of Richmond](#) or [Indiana University Indianapolis](#).
- **AmeriCorps:** Campuses may consider hosting AmeriCorps VISTA on their campus to lead projects to support low-income community members, which could include refugees.
- **Welcome Corps on Campus:** This is an opportunity for campuses to sponsor and enroll refugee students from overseas. The campus must form a campus sponsor group, which can include current students, that will support the welcome and integration of refugee students.
- **Peace Corps:** If your school is part of a Peace Corps partner program (“[Paul D. Coverdell Fellows](#)” or “[Peace Corps Prep](#)”), explore with the campus coordinators how the internship element of these programs might be used to support the intersection of student service-learning and refugee resettlement.

Spotlight: [A Service-Learning Course at The University of Tulsa to Support Student Participation in UT's ECAR Chapter](#)

University of Tulsa (UT) has partnered with a refugee resettlement agency partner, B'nai Emunah Refugee Resettlement Agency (a HIAS affiliate), and other local refugee-serving organizations such as the YWCA, to develop a service-learning course which involves students in the refugee resettlement process through participation in the University's Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR) chapter. Through a trauma-informed approach, students work with an ECAR family on campus and engage in other service-learning activities with local refugee resettlement agencies. This course brings together traditional seminar learning, where students read papers/books and discuss ideas, with hands-on service-learning. Students apply their knowledge to create a program proposal for refugee community support, which allows them to conceptualize new ways of supporting newcomers in their community.

Read more about how this initiative was created and is structured [here](#).

2. TIPS FOR RESETTLEMENT AGENCIES AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The first step in any partnership is finding your partner! An excellent resource for this purpose is the [AHLAN Manual](#): A Manual for Establishing Resettlement Campuses Together, created and published by Every Campus A Refuge.

In particular, please see pages 31-30 for tips on mapping your ecosystem. As well as the following:

- Maps and list of all local resettlement agencies and their contact information (see [here](#)).
- The [ECAR Map Tool](#) is helpful to locate colleges and universities as well as refugee serving organizations in your community.

Partnership Tips of Relevance to Both Higher Ed Institutions and Resettlement Agencies

The following tips are designed to guide both higher education institutions and refugee resettlement agencies in forging partnerships that create volunteer and service opportunities that benefit recently arrived refugees and contribute to the experiential learning of students. There are best practices beyond these tips, these are just intended to get you started with some essential components to consider.

- **Communication:** Create open lines of communication, clear points of contact, and explicit expectations around what and when details need to be communicated.
- **Boundaries:** Set clear boundaries and roles for both students and RAs. Clear boundaries, roles and responsibilities will:
 - o Protect vulnerable clients

- Ensure refugees understand each organization's role and can interact efficiently and successfully (e.g. clarify the volunteers' roles within refugee clients' lives)
- **Expectations: Schools and RAs** should share their expectations and what they each hope to achieve. They should identify explicitly why the collaboration is beneficial to refugees and both organizations.
 - It is a sound practice to have a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) (or similar documents) to clarify the scope of collaboration/roles, especially when working with volunteers and students; such documents may also help people reflect back on their roles and ground the work in benefiting refugees.
 - Be patient, stay open-minded with each other, and be aware that each partner may face particular legal, ethical, or other requirements.
- **Roles and Asset Alignment:** Think critically on both sides about what can be delegated, how to do it, and about finding creative ways to work together.
 - Consider how refugees themselves can contribute.
 - Identify students' strengths and skills and how to best utilize them.
- **Think about sustainability in advance, especially in terms of maintaining relationships**
 - Consider the long-term sustainability of the partnership and the potential for creating ongoing programs rather than short-term initiatives.
 - Develop a strategy for institutionalizing the partnership (with structure and norms) so it can endure beyond the tenure of individual champions at either organization.
 - Have a clear and reliable point of contact, and when there is a transition, arrange an appropriate handover.
 - Be cognizant that needs and circumstances change. Client caseloads change, different classes may be taught during different semesters.

Spotlight: [The Ready for American Hospitality Program \(RAH\)](#) at the University of Denver



The RAH program is a collaboration between the [Ethiopian Community Development Council](#) (ECDC), the [African Community Center \(ACC\)](#) and the [University of Denver's \(DU\) Fritz Knoebel School of Hospitality Management](#). RAH serves as a service-learning program for refugee, asylee, and migrant populations alongside their undergraduate counterparts of the Human

Capital course, engaging in cultural exchange and Hospitality training that equips the students to be stronger candidates for the US hospitality workforce, and aiding the refugee population in retaining meaningful employment. The RAH program is a unique example of a model that shows how a higher education institution can utilize its resources to support the capacity of refugee agencies by providing resettlement

services, whilst simultaneously leveraging the partnership for college student learning.

Read more about how this initiative was created and is structured [here](#).

Planning Tips Specifically for Colleges and Universities

- **Be mindful of RA staff capacity and priorities.** Consider how to minimize the administrative burden on RAs and their need for reliable volunteers and support.
 - Seek to accommodate the location/transportation needs of RAs when possible.
- **Integrate service-learning thoughtfully into a course.**
 - Spread the service-learning commitment throughout the semester and start as early in the semester as possible.
 - Remember students' time commitments in the community when planning readings/assignments for the semester. Consider reducing assignments to allow students to focus fully on their time in the community.
 - Create opportunities for reflection and debrief in class, and when possible, include RA staff.
- **Allow time to understand and address needs from the perspective of resettlement organizations**
 - RAs know what they need. Give them time and opportunity to share their perspectives. Remember that a higher education institution typically brings more financial resources and power to the relationship.
 - Taking the time to do the advance work through dialogue and inquiry, lay a foundation, and truly understand each other's needs will help ensure the collaboration is mutually beneficial.
 - Be aware that these relationships are the most meaningful part of the service-learning process, and these take time.
- **Funding:** When possible, offer funding to support the project or resettlement agency, especially if the RA is training and investing in the students.
- **Cultural Competency and Sensitivity**
 - Ensure the students are trained in cultural responsiveness and humility to work effectively with diverse refugee populations.
 - Provide training for university staff and students (cultural awareness, trauma-informed care, confidentiality, refugee experiences, etc.) to prevent inadvertent harm.

Spotlight: [Resettle Together Higher Ed Program: IINE, UMass, and Northeastern Collaborative Transformational Service-Learning Curriculum](#)

The International Institute of New England, in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and Northeastern University has designed a transformational service-learning curriculum to equip universities and colleges to become receiving communities for refugees and other immigrants seeking safety in the U.S. due to war, violence, and persecution. Students and university communities

work alongside professional resettlement staff to gain firsthand experience in the complexities of the resettlement process by providing essential humanitarian assistance for newly arriving families and individuals forcibly displaced.

Read more about how this initiative was created and is structured [here](#).

Tips Specifically for Resettlement Agencies

- **Shared Goals and Alignment**
 - Ensure that the university shares the agency's goals related to refugee support, such as community integration, academic access, language development, or career advancement.
 - Consider the alignment of values, mission, and approaches to working with vulnerable populations.
- **Resource Alignment**
 - Identify specific programs or services the partnership will focus on, such as language classes, mental health support, legal aid, vocational training, or research initiatives.
 - Set clear objectives and measurable outcomes to evaluate the partnership's success.
- **Faculty and Research Collaboration**
 - Leverage faculty expertise in areas like social work, public health, law, or international relations to support resettlement programs or conduct research on refugee issues.
 - Consider joint research projects or grant applications that focus on refugee-related topics, which can benefit both the university and the resettlement agency.
 - Consider ancillary ways for RAs to work with universities in capacity building.
- **Legal and Privacy Considerations**
 - Be mindful of legal considerations regarding data privacy, especially when sharing information about refugee clients.
 - Establish protocols to protect sensitive information and respect confidentiality requirements.
- **Evaluation and Feedback**
 - Create mechanisms for regular evaluation and feedback from both refugee participants and university partners to continually improve the partnership.
 - Involve refugees in shaping the programs to ensure their needs are effectively addressed.
 - Have students present on their experience to RA staff.

Spotlights: Two Examples of Health Navigator Programs

[Washington State University's Health Navigator Program: Pairing Nurses and Newcomers \(WA\)](#)

[WSU's College of Nursing students](#) in Spokane, WA, in collaboration with IRC-Spokane staff, serve as health system navigators. The students assist with medical and dental appointments and provide training on insurance and health access issues for newly arrived refugee families. This program addresses two challenges at once. First, it engages nursing students who might otherwise have limited experience with immigrant and refugee populations before graduation, helping them prepare for work with a population they may encounter in the careers. Second, it helps reduce the challenges and anxieties faced by refugees in navigating the US healthcare system.

Read more about how this initiative was created and is structured [here](#).

[Georgetown University Health Navigators \(DC\)](#) The Refugee Health Navigator Program was developed to address common barriers to health care and to increase refugees' comprehension of the healthcare system. Students from different programs at Georgetown University are paired and matched up with a newly arrived refugee family that is working with a resettlement agency. The program reduces barriers to health care by helping newcomers navigate health care services and systems and promotes newcomer health.

Read more about how this initiative was created and is structured [here](#).

3. FOCUS ON SERVICE-LEARNING/COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING

Tips for Training and Preparing Students to Engage in Refugee Resettlement

- **Utilize Existing Resources.** The links below offer helpful videos on the stated topics:
 - Training on refugee resettlement:
 - [Who Are Refugees?](#)
 - [Who are Refugees | Resettlement Process](#)
 - [Community Sponsorship Essentials Training](#)
 - Community engaged learning resources:
 - [Interdependence: Global Solidarity and Local Actions Toolkit](#)
 - [AHLAN Manual](#) and [ECAR Minor](#)
- **Additional Tips for Training and Preparing Students**
 - Add localized/community specific knowledge to general training on refugee resettlement.
 - Advise students on not giving information that they are uncertain about or not knowledgeable about.
 - Remember to protect clients and protect liability for RA & HEI (i.e. not being alone with children, etc.), including privacy (especially in terms of social media), confidentiality, boundaries and expectations, personal safety, and mandated reporting if applicable.
 - Teach cultural competencies/cultural humility and responsiveness and how to work in a trauma-informed context.
 - Ensure the professor is equipped with information to be able to facilitate reflection conversations and questions in class.

- Practice using translation apps and communication with English language learners.

Spotlight: [Russell Sage College's Intercultural Café: a Welcoming and Inclusive Environment for Practicing English Conversation Skills \(NY\)](#)



The Intercultural Café at Russell Sage College is a welcoming and inclusive environment designed for those wishing to practice their English conversation skills. Learners are invited to the Café to enjoy tea and refreshments, meet college students, and practice conversation skills. Learners prepare for the American citizenship exam and practice English grammar, reading, writing, and basics. The Café provides an enriching environment for English language learners and college students to facilitate multicultural interactions, meaningful connections, and lasting memories. The local resettlement

agency partners with the Café.

Read more about how this initiative was created and is structured [here](#).

Tips to Ensure that “Learning” Happens in Addition to Service

- Plan reflection activities on a regular basis, including reflection and dialogue in class, self-reflection through journaling, and connecting reflections to readings.
- Provide relevant readings and background information on the ethics of community-based learning, discuss savior complex, etc.
- Ask the students to identify goals and their skillsets to help them choose how they can support the project, research, or direct service.
- Creating "meaningful moments" within service-learning.
- Ensure coursework aligns with refugee resettlement by having a conversation with the resettlement agency to discuss learning objectives. This will ensure shared goals and objectives and allow for flexibility to pivot when necessary.

Spotlight: [Jiran - The Arabic Community Action Summer \(VT\)](#)



Jiran is Middlebury College's intensive summer language program that pairs intermediate and advanced language students with underserved newcomer families who speak their target language. “Jiran” means “neighbors” in Arabic, and the goals of the program are twofold. First, Jiran helps university-level language students improve their linguistic and intercultural competence while learning

about US immigration and refugee resettlement. Secondly, Jiran helps bridge resource gaps and supports recently arrived families as they build connections in their new communities. Jiran has historically been an Arabic language program but is now exploring expanding the model to more languages. Jiran's approach ends up empowering both participating students and participating families because it provides space for these groups to shape the program together. The program has forged strong relationships with the local school system, government, NGOs, religious organizations, and higher education institutions in its areas of operation.

Read more about how this initiative was created and is structured [here](#).

**This resource is part of a suite developed by 2024 Communities of Practice and Action (COPAs) convened by the SHERR project.*

Disclaimer: The ideas shared here represent the collective thinking and brainstorming of the members of the respective COPA. They do not necessarily reflect the views of all individual COPA members, their employers and organizations, the SHERR project, or the U.S. Department of State.