

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tienen alas, pero no las pueden usar: Stories of immigrants in search of work credentials

Jonathan Vega-Martinez, Maria M. Pache de Athayde, Fabián Torres-Ardila, Phillip Granberry

March 2025



Cover art by Dave Ortega, a cartoonist who lives and works in Somerville. Besides creating comics, he teaches at Lesley University and workshops for the Boston Comics Art Foundation.



Foreword

The engineer who is driving an Uber. The judge who fled her homeland and today is vacuuming downtown office buildings. The infectious disease doctor who came to the United States and found that the path to licensure was longer than her family could wait for her to send money home, so she works long hours as a home care aide.

Whether in casual conversation or a community center English class, many of us have met immigrants who are enormously “overqualified” for their current positions, to put it mildly, and wondered how such talent could be so carelessly wasted. Some of it is personal – our own loved one who is working in low-wage jobs, stuck by a lack of language skills and the knowledge of how to “re-become” the professional they were before coming to the U.S.

The barriers are deeply embedded in our immigration and education systems, and in our labor market. In many ways, we are a nation that relies on immigrants but does little to welcome or nourish them. For Latinx and Caribbean communities in Massachusetts, bias likely adds an insidious extra layer – we are unnaturally accustomed to seeing brown and black faces in low-wage positions. Wage data affirms this.

Our two organizations – one, the only Latinx-serving community fund in Massachusetts, and the other a statewide leader in English language training, practice and policy, have seen firsthand—through research and direct engagement with community members—the urgent need for a more accessible, sustainable, and efficient ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) system. Strong ESOL programming is not just about language acquisition; it is a pathway to economic mobility.

Years of experience also have taught us, however, that there is more to the message: a successful ESOL system must be a cornerstone of the Commonwealth’s broader strategy to build a more competitive economy, foster thriving communities, and lead the nation in quality of life for all. English classes should provide a foundation – even if the journey will be frustrating and lengthy – and serve as a path back to immigrants’ previous, or new, chosen professions.

“Tienen alas, pero no las pueden usar: Stories of immigrants in search of work credentials” begins with individuals who are enrolled in English classes, but, thankfully, ends with a roadmap to improve our adult education, higher education and workforce development systems. This report also touches on how employers and state and federal policy makers can advocate for a much-needed holistic approach to leveraging immigrant talent.

If we are successful, we are not only uplifting individuals but ensuring a more competitive, equitable and prosperous Massachusetts for generations to come.

Javier A. Juarez
Executive Director
The Latino Equity Fund

Claudia Green
Executive Director
English for New Bostonians

Introduction

This summary presents the results of a qualitative research study, funded by The Latino Equity Fund at the Boston Foundation, aimed at understanding the challenges that highly skilled immigrants face when reentering their careers in Massachusetts.

Aspiring immigrant workers must meet state-specific requirements – including education, training, testing, and other criteria – to practice in licensed professions. These requirements, referred to as occupational credentialing, hinder recent immigrants (and many US workers) from reaching their full potential in the labor force. These immigrants already have the required credentialing for employment in higher-skilled positions in their home countries but may require additional credentials to enter the US labor market.

Our study is based on interviews with 20 recent immigrants who currently reside in Massachusetts, and who are currently enrolled in English classes offered by organizations across the state. The findings of this study reveal six critical factors that influence immigrant’s success in navigating the credentialing process. These factors are US immigration policy; immigrants’ social and cultural capital; immigrants’ aspirational capital; family dynamics and social ties; immigrants’ ability to manage change in the US; and the complexity of the credentialing process itself.

Each of these factors plays a significant and unique role in determining how easily immigrants can gain access in Massachusetts to the same or similar careers as they held in their country of origin. For example, we observed frustrations stemming from a credentialing process whose requirements are often revealed only after an immigrant is denied employment due to lack of accreditation. Similarly, we heard about the complexity of an immigration system that leaves many immigrants without a path to regularize their status and to access better job opportunities. Overall, this study shows that we cannot reduce the credentialing process to a single factor (e.g., immigration policies). Instead, we need a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of immigrants who are seeking opportunities for improving their job status.

Throughout this study, we learned how immigrants, while navigating the credentialing process, find ways to reinvent themselves and to maintain agency and self-determination despite encountering systems and processes that often seemed to work against them. We hope that the stories highlighted in this report about immigrants’ resilience and self-determination can serve as inspirational examples of their valuable contributions to the workforce – and that our recommendations for successful career pathways will be heeded by policymakers, philanthropic organizations and business leaders, and our elected officials.

Methodology and Approach

This study involved interviews with twenty recently arrived immigrants. Of these participants, fifteen had obtained a professional degree in their country of origin, while five had earned a technical degree. Additionally, 80% of the participants were women. We used narrative analysis to analyze our data since it allowed us to examine how individuals, in this case immigrants, confer subjective meaning to their experiences (Bamberg, 2012). By focusing on their stories, we were able to uncover a range of personal, familial, social, and economic factors that shaped their interactions with the immigration process and the revalidation of their credentials.

To make sense of the stories told by the immigrants we also employed root cause analysis (RCA). This helped us identify the underlying challenges immigrants face when trying to revalidate their credentials and enter/reenter the job market as well as more systematically map out the stories that were being shared with us during interviews. A fishbone diagram was used to visually represent the factors that the participants face during the credentialing process.

Findings and Results

Based on literature, interviews, and experiential knowledge the research team identified aspirational capital, social and cultural capital, credentialing processes, family ties, immigration, and managing change in the US as the most important sources of difficulty as immigrants seek to have their degrees recognized and to obtain qualified employment in Massachusetts. Early on we recognized that these six factors should not be viewed as fully distinct and independent from each other. In fact, themes often overlap and differentiating between them can often be difficult. One of the main findings of this project is that we must look at the experiences of immigrants holistically. As the process to reenter a career is slow, complex, and potentially resource-intensive, seemingly unrelated factors like rent levels will, directly or indirectly, divert an immigrant's resources away from the recredentialing process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As found by this report, there is no single obstacle facing credentialled immigrants as they attempt to restart their careers in the US. Likewise, there is no single solution that will act as a silver bullet to address the challenges they face. The recommendations provided in this report should be understood, not as options to be chosen from, but as different elements which can be used to compose a plan of action.



Recommendation: Create a statewide clearinghouse, possibly to be called the Repository of Credentialing Information.

Establishing a centralized repository and/or clearinghouse can help ameliorate these issues by streamlining the verification and recognition across various sectors, ensuring full entry into the labor market. This centralized system should allow them to securely upload and store the proof of their qualifications, which in turn would be verified by relevant authorities and accessible to employers (e.g., similar to the I-9 verification system). To best serve the requirements of different labor market sectors, the repository should allow for industry-specific requirements, ensuring that credential revalidations, certifications, and education align with the specific requirements of specific professions.



Recommendation: Strengthen and foster a network of community-based organizations and non-profit organizations (NPOs) to implement programs for the support of immigrants going through the credentialing process

Enhancing the coordination and resource sharing among nonprofit organizations and trusted local partners is a critical step that has the potential to enable them to better serve immigrants through the credentialing process. Developing a centralized platform, website, or NPO support network to share resources, expertise, and information can help decrease redundancies and identify gaps in the support processes for immigrants. This more collaborative approach with NPOs may allow organizations to enhance outreach efforts in underserved areas and maximize the use of their limited staff and resources at the same time as they address the needs and concerns of immigrants.



Recommendation: Support the funding and implementation of professional English courses.

One of the primary challenges immigrants encounters is proficiency in the English language. However, it's important to recognize that the level of English literacy required to access well-paid jobs varies. Some immigrants may only need to acquire technical or professional English skills, rather than full literacy across all four language domains (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), which can take three to seven years to develop. The main area of opportunity is for nonprofit organizations, community colleges, local governments, and accrediting organizations to provide specialized courses in business, medical, or technical English to meet sector- or profession-specific standards.



Recommendation: Expand funding for research to enhance support for immigrants in the credentialing process.

Further research is essential to deepen the understanding of these challenges and improve the support structures available to immigrants during this process. Future research should focus on two key areas not covered in this study:

Stakeholder Perspectives: It is crucial to gather additional insights from a broader range of stakeholders, including employers, professional associations, community organizations, and immigrant advocacy groups. By incorporating their perspectives, we can better understand and address the barriers and opportunities that exist at various stages of the credentialing process.

Assessment of Existing Resources: A comprehensive asset-mapping and review of current resources, such as credential evaluation organizations, professional networks, and state- and local-level support systems, is necessary. Identifying gaps in these resources and understanding how they are utilized can inform targeted strategies to enhance their effectiveness.

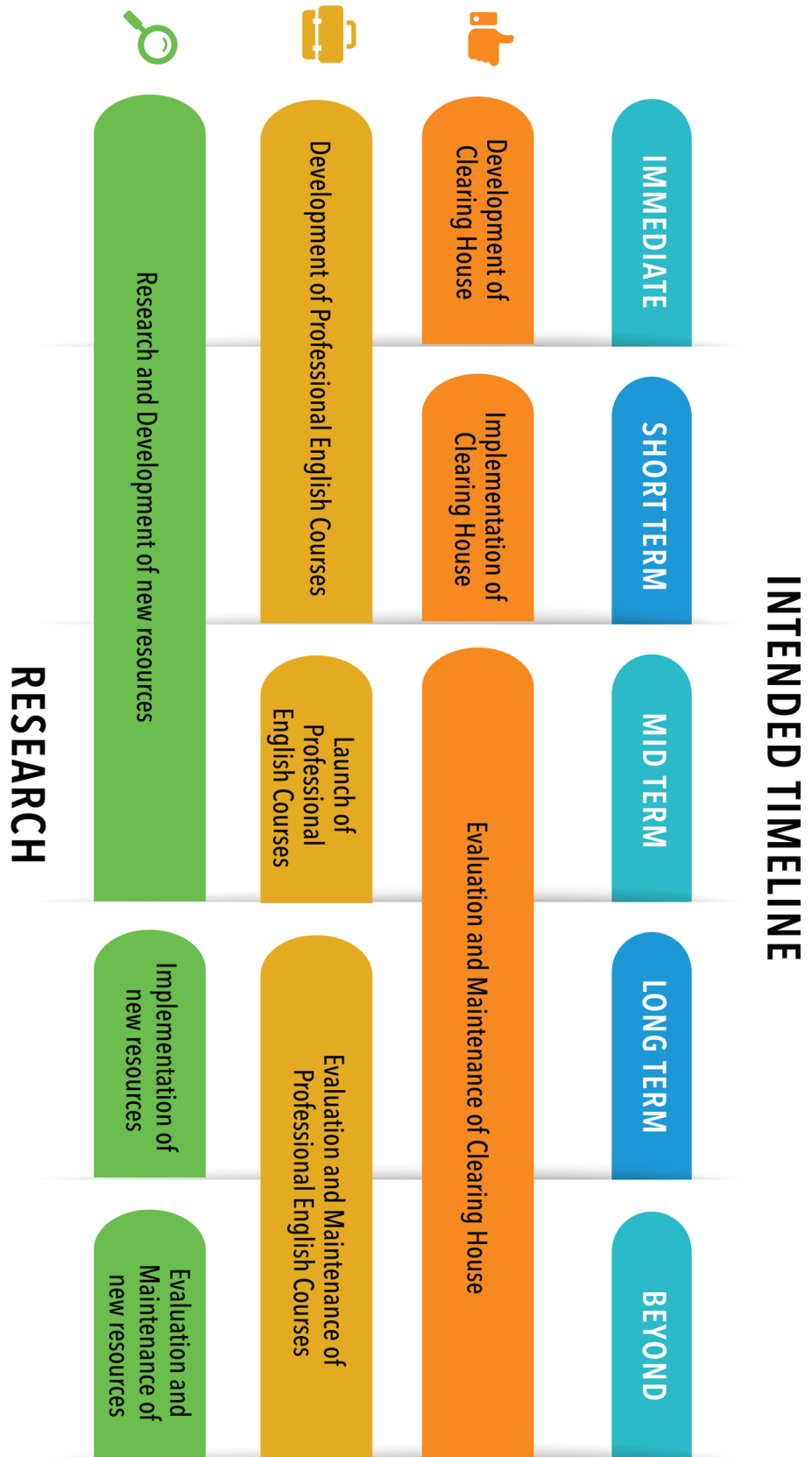


Figure 1. The diagram illustrates the integration of the various recommendations across a proposed timeline, highlighting their interconnectedness and alignment over time.

About the Gastón Institute

Established in 1989, the Massachusetts Legislature created the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy in response to a need for an improved understanding of the Latino experience in the commonwealth. Now in its 34th year, the Gastón Institute continues its mission of informing the public and policymakers about issues vital to the state's growing Latino community and providing information and analysis necessary for effective Latino participation in public policy development. To learn more about the Gastón Institute, visit <https://www.umb.edu/gaston-institute/>.

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About the Authors

Jonathan Vega Martinez is a PhD candidate in the sociology department in UMass Boston. He specializes in the intersection of Queerness and Coloniality. He is currently working on his dissertation which explores the relationship between the Puerto Rican decolonization movement and the queer rights movement. Jonathan uses qualitative methods in his research, focusing on semi-structured interviews to understand the meaning making processes of his respondents.

Maria M. Pache de Athayde is a Ph.D. candidate at The McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston and a research assistant at the Mauricio Gastón Institute. She holds a master's in public policy from American University and a B.A. in International Relations from Mount Holyoke College. Her research focuses on nonprofit advocacy, climate change policy, communication, and technology. She studies how nonprofits use big data, technology, and digital platforms for advocacy and community engagement.

Fabián Torres-Ardila, is the associate director of the Gastón Institute. He draws on the strength and resources of UMass Boston to support research focused on the Latino community and works to ensure that the institute supports the development of Latino community leadership through partnerships with local groups. He holds a PhD in Mathematics from Boston University.

Phillip Granberry is a social demographer and senior Data Analyst at the Gastón Institute. He worked with community-based organizations assisting recently arrived U.S. immigrants before earning a Ph.D. in Public Policy from UMass Boston. His research focuses on Latinos in the United States. For over a decade, he has published demographic reports addressing the social and economic contributions of Latinos in Massachusetts. He is a Senior Lecturer in Economics at UMass Boston, where he teaches courses in metropolitan area development and international migration. In addition to his research and teaching at UMass Boston, he is a Senior Researcher in demography for the City of Boston Planning Department.