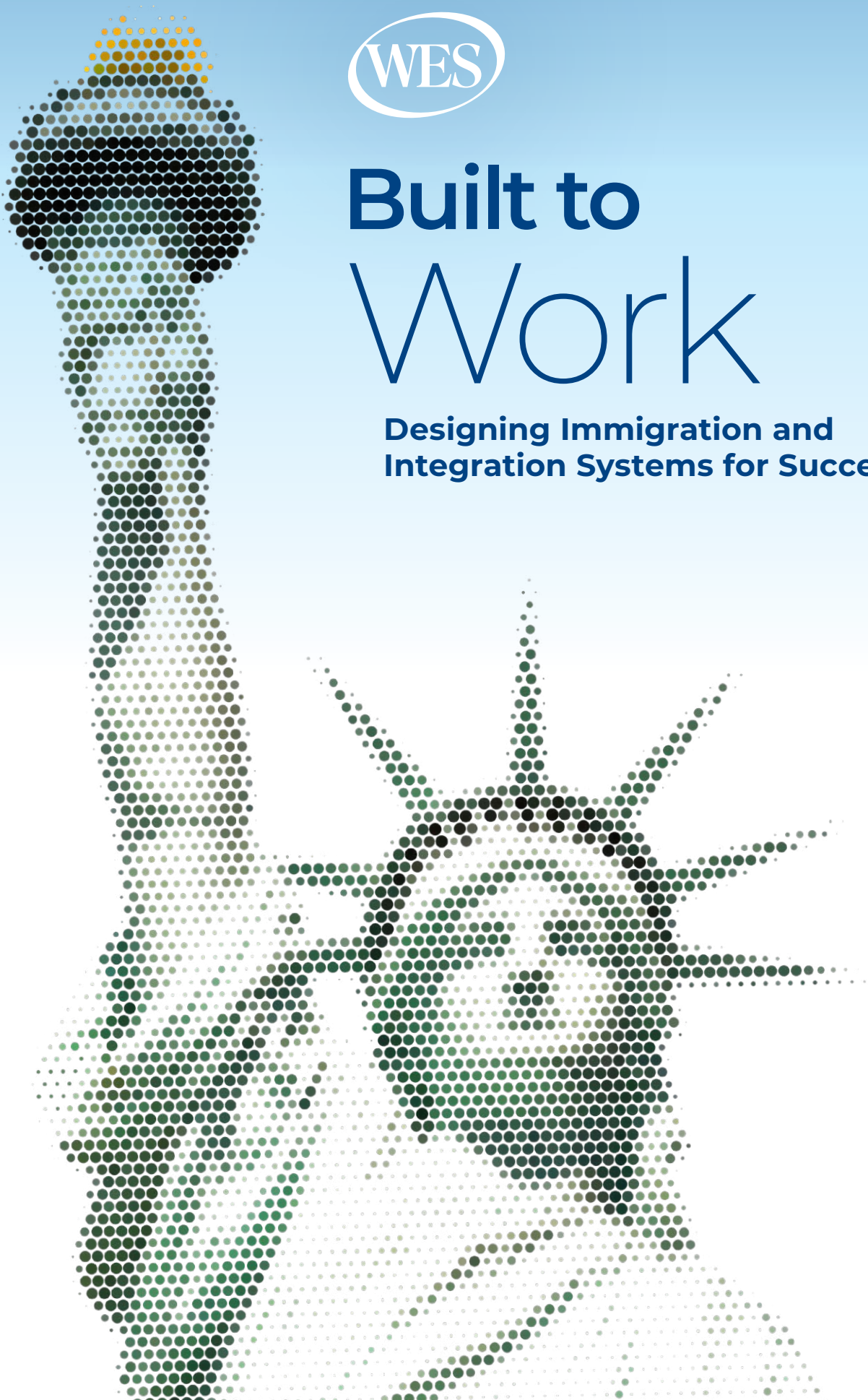




Built to Work

**Designing Immigration and
Integration Systems for Success**



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Foreword: Shaping Systems for Success

Throughout my career, I have often found myself moving between sets of distinct conversations. I have met with governors and congressional staff about labor shortages and economic competitiveness; with employers struggling to fill critical positions; with policymakers working to recognize international skills; with workforce agencies expanding pathways to good jobs; with refugee organizations helping families rebuild their lives; and with federal leaders debating immigration policy.

While these conversations are separate, the challenges are inherently interconnected: A hospital staffing shortage can simultaneously be a workforce issue, a licensing issue, an economic development issue, and an immigration issue. The same is true in manufacturing, construction, agriculture, long-term care, and many other sectors.

There is a singular throughline: policies that support, or don't, a healthy and mutually beneficial immigration and integration system that responds to what communities need to thrive. Creating systems that make immigrant contributions possible is both an economic imperative and a profoundly human one. At the center are people seeking good work—the opportunity to support their families, use their skills and build a future—and not simply be defined by the circumstances that brought them here.

In creating this framework, we began with a simple question: If these challenges are interconnected, why do we continue designing the solutions separately?

WES is uniquely positioned to ask this question. For more than 50 years, we have helped people translate education and experience acquired in one country into opportunity in another. Doing this work has given us a close view of both individual talent and the institutional barriers that prevent it from being fully recognized. We still evaluate international qualifications, and our role now extends well beyond it: We work with policymakers, workforce systems, employers, educational institutions, community organizations, and philanthropic partners to change the policies and practices that shape whether immigrants can contribute their skills. This combination of direct experience, policy expertise, and systems-change work allows us to see where immigration and integration intersect—and where disconnected systems leave talent and opportunity on the table, at significant human and economic cost.

To develop this framework, WES brought together leaders in workforce development, immigration policy, business and industry, state and local government, adult education, and community organizations — whose expertise too rarely cross-pollinates. With input from a council

of trusted experts and lively conversations, we developed and debated recommendations and tested ideas against the realities and constraints of implementation.

We also commissioned research with state and local leaders across the country to understand how demographic change, workforce pressures, immigration, and integration are playing out in communities of different sizes, regions, and political contexts. We looked for diverse perspectives and places—because each community is unique, but recurring lessons point to broadly applicable principles.

There was disagreement, of course, as there should have been. Thoughtful people will often reach different conclusions about the best path forward. Yet the conversations repeatedly returned to several shared convictions, including a rejection of the false choices that too often shape public debate: between investing in the domestic workforce and recognizing immigrant talent, meeting humanitarian commitments and advancing economic priorities, or welcoming newcomers and maintaining an orderly immigration system. These priorities are not inherently in conflict; they can and should reinforce one another.

Conversations returned again and again to common threads: that immigration ultimately succeeds or falls short in communities; that the systems surrounding people shape whether their talents can be fully realized; that immigration should be understood as part of a broader workforce strategy; and that states, regions, business and industry, local leaders, workers, and community institutions possess practical knowledge that should play a greater role in shaping policy and implementation.

These themes are core to this solutions-oriented framework, and they make clear that a more connected approach is urgent.

I do not expect every reader to agree with each recommendation that follows. My hope is that this framework sparks ideas and encourages conversations—ones that value the experience of those closest to implementation, move beyond false choices, and find actionable solutions, small and large, that turn the gears of larger systems change. My hope also is that we find a way to take these ideas and plug them in, where possible, to make our economic and workforce systems work better for all Americans. And we are offering it now because we believe the United States will not ultimately succeed unless it builds immigration and integration systems that work—for immigrants, for communities, and for the country.

Kit Taintor
Head of Policy and Practice

Executive Summary

Communities across the nation face growing workforce shortages with real consequences for Americans—from longer waits to see a doctor to reduced business hours and constrained economic growth. At the same time, millions of immigrants already living in the United States are working below their skill level or outside their field because workforce, education, licensing, and employment systems do not consistently recognize or make full use of their education, experience, and talent.

Continued investment in education, skills development, and domestic workforce participation remains essential, but these strategies alone cannot meet the country's long-term workforce and demographic needs. Throughout U.S. history, economic growth has depended on both developing the domestic workforce and welcoming immigrants whose skills, labor, and resilience strengthen communities. We have an opportunity to pursue those strategies more intentionally and ensure that they work together.

To that end, this framework advances two connected ideas. First, communities need stronger systems to recognize immigrant talent and connect it to opportunity. Second, immigration pathways should be designed to produce stronger outcomes for all—immigrants, employers, and communities. Immigration policies determine who comes to the U.S. and under what terms. For the benefits of immigration to be fully realized, we also need integration capacity, which shapes whether immigrants and communities can thrive.

Together, these recommendations demonstrate that immigration and integration are not separate policy challenges, but complementary strategies for strengthening the country. By building the systems that allow communities to make full use of immigrant talent—and designing immigration pathways to work with those systems—the U.S. can create a more responsive, durable, and effective approach to meeting its economic, demographic, and community priorities.

Introduction

America's Demographic Dilemma and Workforce Shortage

The United States is entering a period of profound demographic change that will shape its economy, labor market, and communities for decades to come. A rapidly aging population, historically low birth rates, and slower labor force growth are fundamentally changing the relationship between communities, workers, employers, and the economy. The share of Americans age 65 and older has increased¹ from 12.4 percent in 2007 to 17.9 percent in 2024 and is projected to reach 21.2 percent by 2035. These trends reduce labor force participation and increase demands for health care, long-term care, and other essential services.

Americans age 65 and older will reach 21.2 percent by 2035.

By 2031, deaths in the U.S. are projected to outnumber² births. In short, there are not enough U.S.-born workers to fill workforce shortages. These demographic trends are now structural realities that are already reshaping economic opportunity and quality of life in communities across the country. Immigration will be required for future population sustainability³ and growth.

By 2031, deaths in the U.S. are projected to outnumber births.

“ If you remove international immigration, we’ve had negative population growth for several years now. Immigrants are the only growing part of our population. We either attract them and the state grows, or we don’t, and the state population shrinks, and this dependency ratio becomes untenable.”

*—New Mexico,
Community Leader*

That future is now. Today, more than 90 million⁴ Americans live in areas without enough primary care physicians to meet current demand. Entire counties have little or no access to basic health services. Rural eldercare facilities turn away patients because they cannot recruit or maintain enough workers. In construction and the skilled trades, only two workers enter the workforce⁵ for every five who retire, slowing housing production and contributing to rising costs. In agriculture, where only 182 domestic workers applied⁶ for more than 415,000 advertised seasonal positions in 2025, persistent labor shortages threaten food production and supply chains. Across industries and regions, employers increasingly report that growth is constrained not by demand for their products or services, but by an inability to find enough workers. Recent immigration policy changes, such as restricting work authorization and legal immigration, have exacerbated these issues.

90M+ Americans live in areas without enough primary care physicians.

Only 182 workers applied for over **400,000** jobs.

“ We need two million immigrants a year to keep the United States economy going. In 2025, not only did we not get the two million, we deported half a million. So we’re down two and a half million people to keep the economy running. That affects everything.”

—Indiana, Community Leader

Immigration: The Key to Economic Growth

For more than two decades, immigration has helped offset the nation’s changing demographics and sustain economic growth. Immigrants contribute billions of dollars⁷ in taxes each year, have consistently paid more⁸ into public programs than they receive in benefits, start businesses at higher rates⁹ than the U.S.-born population, and have become indispensable to industries ranging from health care and manufacturing to construction, agriculture, hospitality, and technology. Importantly, immigrants are not on the outskirts of our communities, but are already foundational to them, making up nearly 20 percent¹⁰ of the U.S. workforce. Investing in and integrating immigrant talent is not just a matter of policy, but an imperative for the country’s long-term prosperity.

Immigrants
make up nearly
20 percent
of the U.S.
workforce.

“ We love American workers. We love American ingenuity. We want to hire. But when we post a job, and there are 5,000 job vacancies around this engineering or medical field, then you get two Americans—that’s still leaving 4,998 jobs open.”

—Business and Industry Leader

What’s also true is that the U.S. too often fails to fully realize immigrants’ skills and ability to contribute. Currently, the systems responsible for recognizing their education and experience are insufficient. Thus, highly educated immigrants frequently remain underemployed. Either their credentials are not recognized, or they cannot navigate complex licensing systems. As a result, critical positions go unfilled while qualified essential workers with durable and transferable skills remain disconnected from opportunities. Meanwhile, communities invest in workforce development, overlooking existing immigrant talent.

No person or state has ever been immune from the impacts of demographic shifts and worsening worker shortages, regardless of geography, population, or political stripe. The decision before us is whether we will resign ourselves to the bleak realities imposed by current trends, or intentionally design thoughtful, responsive approaches that enable immigrants, employers, and communities to succeed together. To do so requires investments—such as redeployment of existing funds, staff and resource capacity, public-private partnerships, incentive structures—that strengthen the workforce systems communities rely on and expand opportunity for U.S.-born and immigrant workers alike. Communities that invest in integration infrastructure through a coordinated approach to integration and immigration will have a clear path for addressing shortages.

“ Immigrants are driving the economy in North Carolina, especially around farmwork, especially around construction development. North Carolina is one of the most growing states in the nation. That means we need more housing, more buildings. Immigrants are absolutely the cornerstone of those industries, hands down.”

*—North Carolina, Academic
and Research Leader*

Building an Integrated Solution for the Future

Indeed, a coordinated and thoughtful approach—marrying immigration and integration as essential, singular infrastructure—offers the greatest opportunity for creating a system that serves our communities and benefits our country. Immigration pathways can achieve their workforce and economic promise only if systems have the capacity to connect people to good jobs, recognize their skills, and support long-term economic participation. Likewise, even the strongest workforce and integration systems will succeed in addressing demographic change only if there are enough workers to meet growing demand. To realize these complementarities, immigration pathways should be designed with successful integration in mind, and integration systems should be developed to maximize the economic, civic, and social contributions of the people those pathways serve.

This framework does not suggest choosing between humanitarian commitments and economic priorities.

The U.S. immigration system has always balanced multiple goals: offering refuge, reuniting families, addressing crises, meeting workforce demands, and advancing national interests. These aims often seem at odds, but they're most effective when they work together. When immigrants—whether refugees, asylees, family-sponsored, employment-based, or long-term residents—are empowered to contribute, everyone benefits: workers, employers, communities, and the nation. Strong integration systems and smart immigration pathways make humanitarian efforts more effective and workforce systems more nimble. When these systems and pathways work together, public confidence rises—proving that immigration can deliver real benefits while upholding American ideals.

Across the country, states, business and industry, local communities, labor unions, workforce agencies, and other stakeholders are already demonstrating what is possible. They are modernizing workforce development strategies, improving credential recognition, strengthening partnerships, and finding new ways to connect immigrant talent to regional economic needs. These efforts suggest that better outcomes are possible when communities intentionally build the capacity to recognize and make use of the skills, talent, and experiences all immigrants bring. To date, however, these innovations remain uneven and are too rarely reflected in how immigration pathways themselves are designed.

This framework builds on those lessons and the United States's long history of integrating immigrants. It argues that immigration and integration should be understood as parts of a single system whose success depends on how well its components work together. It calls for treating integration capacity as essential economic infrastructure and for designing immigration pathways that are informed by workforce realities, state and local expertise, employer demand, and the conditions that support successful long-term outcomes. In doing so, it offers a vision for an immigration system that is both more responsive to demographic and economic realities and more capable of fulfilling the nation's humanitarian and foreign policy commitments, strengthening public confidence and ensuring that communities across the country can translate immigration into broader opportunity and benefit for all of America's residents.

The U.S. has long pursued multiple objectives when designing such pathways. These include providing refuge to those fleeing persecution,

reuniting families, responding to humanitarian crises, meeting workforce needs, and advancing broader national interests. These goals are often presented as competing priorities. They are not. Rather, they are most durable when they reinforce one another. A system that enables refugees, asylees, family-sponsored immigrants, employment-based immigrants, and long-term residents seeking work authorization to contribute fully to the economy better serves workers, employers, communities, and the nation as a whole. Strong integration systems make humanitarian commitments more successful, and thoughtfully designed immigration pathways make workforce systems more responsive. Together, they strengthen public confidence that immigration is producing measurable benefits for the country while remaining consistent with American values.

How to Use This Framework

The framework is designed to help leaders think beyond immigration as a stand-alone policy issue and instead approach immigration and integration as part of a comprehensive workforce and economic strategy. It is meant as a practical guide to support action at multiple levels of government, across priority industries, and for attentive system change champions: policymakers, workforce leaders, advocates, labor unions, businesses, industry partnerships, immigrant leaders, community-based institutions, and other stakeholders.

As a practical guide, this framework is also deliberately limited in scope. It focuses on a small subset of actionable policy and practice areas where stronger connections between workforce and economic strategy can produce meaningful benefits for immigrants, communities, business and industry, and the U.S. as a whole. Broader dimensions of immigration policy, or comprehensive deep dives into what a healthy economy or workforce needs, are beyond its scope, though importantly the approaches proposed are complementary to efforts to strengthen opportunities for American workers. Similarly, the focus on workforce and economic strategy presupposes that, in a nation born of immigration, immigrants are the foundation of the U.S.—as family members, neighbors, entrepreneurs, innovators, civic leaders, students, volunteers, and contributors to the cultural and social fabric.

Recommendations throughout the framework will resonate differently with every reader—and sometimes not at all. Labor markets, demographic conditions, institutional capacity, industries, and workforce needs differ across states, localities, and regions. Some communities may focus first on credential recognition and access to good, in-demand jobs, while others may prioritize state and local-level coordination, data analysis, or business and industry sector partnerships. Whether you shape policy, implement programs, or convene partners, this framework is designed to spark ideas, inform policy and practice design, and encourage expanded collaboration.

Consider this framework a menu, not a prescription.

Federal policymakers can use the framework to better understand how immigration and workforce systems interact on the ground and how immigration policy can become more responsive to state, regional, and local realities. It encourages policymakers to view immigration as not just a humanitarian or border issue, but also as a long-term workforce and economic strategy—and to recognize that designing strong integration systems is just as important as designing immigration pathways.

State and regional leaders, businesses, workforce boards, educational institutions, philanthropy, labor organizations, community-based organizations, and other system leaders can use the framework to strengthen workforce strategies, improve coordination across institutions, identify barriers, and better connect immigrant talent to good, in-demand jobs. The framework also encourages these partners to contribute their expertise to the design, implementation, and continual improvement of immigration and integration systems, recognizing federal authority.

Many recommendations outlined here are deliberately framed at a strategic level to allow for adaptation across different policy, economic, and geographic contexts. In practice, implementation will require continued experimentation, cross-sector collaboration, and ongoing refinement as communities learn what works best in different environments. Many policymakers and partners across the nation are already using ideas and recommendations such as these, and communities across the U.S. have long made immigration, and integration, work well for the betterment of whole communities.

In this framework, **immigration** refers to the movement of people to the U.S. and the laws, policies, practices, and administrative systems that shape the immigrant experience. **Integration** refers to the process through which immigrants and communities realize maximum mutual benefit and to the systems that make those outcomes possible.

Most importantly, this framework is intended to help us, as a nation, find ways to move forward to ensure our long-term prosperity—and allow immigration to fulfill its potential. We hope it sparks new ideas, sharper questions, and pragmatic action. We have much to gain.





A hand is pointing towards a screen on the right side of the image. The entire image has a blue overlay. A purple rectangular box is positioned in the lower-left area, containing white text.

PILLAR 1:

Strengthen Integration Capacity

**INTEGRATION MUST WORK
FOR IMMIGRATION TO WORK**

For decades, immigration debates in the United States have focused primarily on questions of admission: who should come, through which pathways, and in what numbers. Far less attention has been paid to what happens after arrival: whether the institutions that shape workforce participation can recognize and use the education, skills, and experience immigrants bring with them. Immigration alone does not automatically strengthen local economies, expand workforce participation, or fill labor shortages. Those outcomes depend on whether communities have systems that enable immigrants to translate their talent into economic contribution.

Currently, too few communities have these systems. For this reason, strengthening integration of immigrants into the workforce is part of building economic infrastructure. Integration capacity is economic infrastructure: Communities that do it well are prepared to adapt to demographic change, respond to labor shortages, sustain key industries, and fully benefit from immigration. The economic fate of immigrants affects the economic fate of communities, and those without strong integration capacity pay the cost twice: in the lost productivity of underutilized talent, and again, in the workforce shortage that talent could address.

The economic fate of immigrants affects the economic fate of communities.

Over time, these inefficiencies weaken regional, national, and international competitiveness.

Integration capacity means a community has the systems, coordination, and infrastructure necessary to fully benefit from immigrants and immigration. It reflects whether workforce, education, licensing, economic development, and community institutions can recognize people's education, skills, and experience; connect them efficiently to good, in-demand jobs that match regional workforce needs; reduce unnecessary barriers and delays; and support long-term workforce participation, economic mobility, and shared prosperity.

Integration capacity also includes whether communities understand their own workforce and labor demands and have the institutional ability to align immigration and workforce strategies with real economic conditions over time. Because workforce participation does not occur in isolation, integration capacity also depends on whether related systems—including housing, transportation, health care, childcare, education, and other community infrastructure—are sufficiently aligned and prepared to support long-term community growth and economic participation.

Building capacity and systems to realize the full potential of immigrants and immigration requires more than good intentions or isolated programs. It requires four connected focus areas, each addressed here.

First, integration efforts must be incorporated in mainstream systems. Communities can't build long-term integration capacity if efforts are limited to disconnected pilot programs, temporary grants, or institution-specific initiatives that end with funding cycles. Workforce systems have traditionally focused on preparing workers for good jobs. That remains important. But communities also need systems that are capable of identifying and utilizing skills that already exist. Credential recognition, skills assessment, career mobility pathways, and workforce navigation need to be embedded into workforce systems and economic development strategies.

Second, building integration capacity requires utilizing state and local insights. While immigration policy is decided at the federal level, integration capacity is local. Local leaders see which roles go unfilled, which industries are growing, which workers are retiring, what communities need, and the ability of communities to welcome and integrate newcomers. Yet local voices and insights, including those from community members, labor organizations, and business and industry, rarely reach the systems that govern immigration and integration. A more functional system creates clear ways to incorporate on-the-ground realities into decisions that are too often made at a distance from communities that are most impacted.

Third, systems must apply workforce data to continually adapt to real conditions. If integration systems depend on static assumptions, they become disconnected from the communities they serve. National labor and demographic trends are important, but only part of the picture. Community and state-level data reveal which sectors have the

most unfilled jobs that domestic talent alone cannot address, where immigrants can plug in, where credential barriers slow qualified workers, where residents are most needed, and whether housing and local services can support new residents. Key data are already collected and could be analyzed and adapted into snapshots to help communities respond to changing workforce needs.

Fourth, integration capacity requires strategic and sustained investment. Efforts to attract business investment and seed economic growth depend in part on communities' ability to demonstrate a strong and reliable talent pipeline. In an increasing number of regions, immigrants are an essential part of that pipeline. This means that investments in integration capacity are a core component of broader economic development strategies.

Together, these four focus areas help us see how we can build integration capacity to serve as economic infrastructure.

FOCUS AREA 1:

Incorporate Integration into Mainstream Workforce Systems

If communities want to fully benefit from immigration, integration efforts cannot remain siloed activities operating outside workforce and economic development systems. They must become part of how these systems are structured. The systems that communities already use to develop talent, connect people to jobs, and support economic growth can be adapted. When they are, communities gain access to human capital that often arrives with significant education, work experience, technical expertise, entrepreneurial ambition, and key soft skills such as resilience and adaptability.

Importantly, many of the changes that help immigrants navigate workforce systems more successfully also strengthen those systems for everyone. Clearer career pathways, more responsive workforce services, greater connection to economic needs, and better recognition of skills and experience benefit a wide range of workers. This is already happening in many communities in an effort to strengthen the domestic labor pipeline. These workforce systems can be built upon to connect immigrant talent to opportunity—and, in turn, create responsive and effective economic infrastructure.

The recommendations that follow focus on changes that can make immigrant workforce participation a standard function of workforce and economic development systems—strengthening communities' ability to connect talent to opportunity, support employers, and advance long-term economic growth for everyone.

For the purposes of this framework, mainstream workforce systems refers to a broad network of public and private institutions that connect people to jobs, training, education, and economic opportunities. It includes workforce boards, American Job Centers, community colleges, adult education providers, apprenticeship systems, economic development agencies, employers, licensing entities, and community-based organizations that together shape how workers access employment and career mobility. The system's greatest strength is its scale, infrastructure, and ability to connect workforce strategy to regional economic needs. At the same time, workforce systems are often difficult to navigate and inconsistently connected across institutions. Strengthening the workforce system, including through recommendations in this document, is critical to strengthening integration capacity.

1.1 In mainstream strategy and planning, recognize immigrants as integral to success.

- Explicitly identify immigrants and immigration as part of communities' existing and future talent pipeline in workforce and economic development plans, and treat immigrant workforce participation as central for economic growth.
- Include immigrant populations in labor force scorecards, goals, and performance measures to help ensure that they are recognized and incorporated into mainstream systems rather than remaining invisible or insufficiently reflected within them.
- Incorporate immigrant workforce considerations into routine planning, policy development, and program design to ensure that services and pathways are responsive to the full talent pool.
- Map where eligible immigrant workers encounter barriers in existing systems, including training and adult education programs, and licensing pathways, and address those barriers within the plan.
- Use data and available tools such as contracts, incentive structures, and grant outcomes alongside structured local input to guide investments, pathway design, coordination strategies, and system improvements over time.

“ Maryland is embracing workforce pathways that build on the skills workers already have. Apprenticeships and similar programs let people leverage their skills in paid positions while they continue to learn and grow on the job.”

—Maryland, Community Leader

1.2 Hardwire credential recognition, skill utilization, and career mobility into mainstream systems and partnerships.

- Use Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) state plans and related strategies to establish statewide approaches for credential mobility, workforce participation, skill utilization, and career-aligned employment outcomes.
- Leverage existing workforce funding tools and data, rather than creating new immigrant-specific programs, to support credential evaluation, licensing and certification costs, skills assessment, and related services.
- Strengthen and sustain institutional capacity within systems so that frontline staff understand workforce program eligibility, international credentials, transferable and durable skills, and career mobility pathways that recognize prior experience.
- Support employers in adopting skills-based hiring, credential recognition, and workforce practices and knowledge that improve access to global talent and immigrant access to good work.
- Use sector partnerships and industry engagement strategies to align workforce services with employer demand and improve utilization of immigrant talent.

“ If you help a nurse who has 20 years of training, who is now a janitor, to become a nurse again—the return on investment is huge.”

—Utah, Community Leader

1.3 Advance and expand workforce pathways that build on workers' existing skills and experience.

- Ensure that eligible immigrant workers can equitably access pre-apprenticeship programs, registered apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and sector-specific pathways that expand upon existing skills and experience.
- Support targeted on-ramps that build on internationally acquired skills and experience through progressive occupational training, connecting workers to good jobs in their field without requiring full retraining.
- Develop practical licensing guides and career roadmaps, informed by community-based organizations and workers who have successfully navigated these systems, that help internationally trained workers understand remaining requirements more efficiently.

1.4 Reduce the friction that keeps workers from reaching good jobs.

- Embed or empower staff, such as navigators, at workforce system access points such as American Job Centers or community colleges to help immigrants move more efficiently through disconnected systems, including in high-demand sectors such as health care, to accelerate connections between qualified workers and high-demand occupations.
- Review licensing and certification requirements on an ongoing basis, including as part of an overall effort to remove or streamline requirements that do not improve quality or safety, so that more workers can access skills-aligned jobs faster.
- Review policies, procedures, and program requirements across agencies to identify and remove administrative barriers that slow workers' movement into training, credentials, and employment.
- Expand skills-based hiring and review credential requirements to ensure that workers can access quality jobs based on demonstrated competencies, including soft skills such as resilience and entrepreneurship.



Alternative Licensure Pathways

A lternative licensure pathways¹¹ allow internationally trained physicians to qualify for practice without automatically needing to repeat a U.S. medical residency when they can demonstrate comparable education, prior clinical experience, and current competence. These policies typically require applicants to meet defined eligibility standards, verify their credentials and professional history, pass required examinations, and complete a period of supervised or provisional practice.

States have adopted different versions of the policy, reflecting their specific regulatory structures and workforce needs. Common provisions address how recently a physician must have practiced, the number of years of prior experience required, the qualifications of supervising physicians and employers, the length of provisional practice, and the conditions for transitioning to full licensure. Some pathways prioritize rural or underserved communities or limit participation to approved hospitals and health systems, while others create broader routes to practice. By May 2026, 27 states and two territories¹² had enacted alternative pathways, creating a growing body of policy models that states can compare and refine.

27 states and two territories had enacted alternative pathways.

The policy offers a practical way to address two problems at once: persistent physician shortages and the underuse of experienced immigrant talent. Many states are also pursuing changes to occupational licensure rules and regulations for other in-demand occupations, from dentists¹³ to teachers.¹⁴



Missouri

The International Union of Painters and Allied Trades District Council 58 and St. Louis Community College demonstrate¹⁵ how industry and education partners can make an existing workforce pathway more accessible to eligible workers. District Council 58's training arm, Finishing Trades Institute Upper Midwest, operates a U.S. Department of Labor-recognized registered apprenticeship program¹⁶ for painters and drywall finishers. It partnered with the community college to integrate English language instruction directly into apprenticeship classes.

Rather than requiring apprentices to attain a certain level of English proficiency before entering or progressing through the program, the partnership allows them to develop language and occupational skills concurrently. Close coordination between the college and apprenticeship instructors ensures instruction stays relevant.

The model advances equitable access by adapting a mainstream registered apprenticeship to meet workers' needs, rather than treating English proficiency as a gatekeeping requirement or directing English language learners into a disconnected pathway. It also illustrates the value of sector partnerships: Together, the union, apprenticeship program, and community college help immigrant and other English-learning workers enter and advance in an in-demand career pathway while strengthening the industry's pipeline of trained workers.

Policymakers and workforce leaders should recognize that access does not always require a new program. Public agencies can support similar approaches by encouraging partners to co-design training; coordinating apprenticeship and adult education resources; and tracking whether eligible immigrant and English-learning workers are entering, persisting in, and completing mainstream workforce pathways.

FOCUS AREA 2:

Encourage and Utilize State and Local Insights

Hardwiring of integration capacity into mainstream systems cannot be designed from a distance. People closest to labor markets and communities, including immigrant- and worker-led organizations, have the knowledge to inform system design and improvement and to strengthen integration capacity. They know which jobs are going unfilled, which career pathways are functioning, where immigrant talent could be better leveraged, and what communities and employers need, and their insights should help shape systems that affect them.

Rather than creating entirely new structures, leaders should strengthen existing partnerships to capitalize on immigrant talent in their communities.

Many communities already have cross-sector partnerships, industry collaboratives, workforce boards, economic development councils, and other regional tables that bring together system leaders. These partnerships often have deep knowledge of local industries, workforce shortages, career pathways, programs such as apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships, and the conditions that support successful integration and build integration capacity over time. Rather than creating entirely new structures, leaders should build on and strengthen these existing partnerships wherever possible to include conversations about how to capitalize on immigrant talent residing in their communities.

“ A lot of the creativity is happening at the state level. The federal government tends to be a little bit behind and a little bit prescriptive.”

*—New Mexico,
Community Leader*

Leveraging these existing tables can help ensure that policies reflect local knowledge, allowing systems to learn, adapt, and improve over time. Doing so can improve coordination, reduce duplication, and ensure that decisions reflect real-time workforce and economic conditions.

Effective systems should create multiple pathways for participation. Not every employer, industry association, community organization, or local leader will engage through the same channels or at the same level. A stronger system creates flexible opportunities for participation and feedback. It also ensures that the people responsible for implementing workforce and integration strategies help shape decisions that affect them.

The recommendations that follow focus on strengthening the planning, coordination, and governance structures that connect local knowledge to integration system design. This approach ensures that workforce and integration systems reflect the real needs of the communities they serve, advancing shared prosperity and supporting workforce and economic goals.

2.1 Use existing regional partnerships to coordinate workforce and integration priorities and inform workforce and economic plans.

- Expand the scope and membership of existing regional workforce collaboratives, sector partnerships, and economic development groups to include entities such as Offices of New Americans at state and municipal levels and immigrant-serving organizations, using ongoing forums where key stakeholders can coordinate strategies, investments, and system improvements.
- Charge workforce and economic development groups with regularly assessing and updating integration capacity and strategies as workforce priorities, demographic trends, and local economic conditions change.
- Coordinate partner information on housing availability, transportation systems, educational infrastructure, and health care access alongside workforce and economic needs to holistically understand integration capacity and workforce access.

2.2 Ensure that state and federal decisions are informed by local experience and regional conditions.

- Use regular mechanisms to elevate workforce needs, immigrant integration opportunities, and successful practices so that local experience informs state workforce and economic development decisions.
- Create feedback loops between state agencies and regional partnerships so that lessons from implementation, emerging workforce and economic needs, and changing demographics inform policy, funding, and program design.
- Use simple, shared templates and reporting tools so that partners can summarize local conditions and operational challenges consistently and ensure that this information routinely informs state and federal planning and resource allocation.
- Allow regional partnerships flexibility to adapt statewide workforce and integration strategies to local labor market conditions while advancing shared goals.

“ I think if anything is working, it's the business community taking the issue into its own hands. We are literally saying as leaders in the business community, we are going to get the business community together to have this conversation.”

—North Carolina, Business and Industry Leader

2.3 When possible, use existing tables and defined processes to increase participation and talent utilization to improve outcomes.

- Identify occupations, industries, and career pathways where immigrant talent could help meet regional workforce needs and economic development priorities.
- Work with licensing bodies, businesses, and regulators to identify where international education, licenses, skills, and work experience go unrecognized, even when standards are met.
- Identify where workers are delayed, are diverted, or leave workforce pathways before reaching skill-aligned employment or advancement.
- Determine where language access, career navigation, skills-building opportunities, and credential recognition should be integrated into mainstream workforce programs to accelerate meaningful workforce participation.
- Bring relevant decision-makers together to determine which barriers require policy, program, funding, or practice changes.
- Make it a shared regional responsibility to regularly surface and address recurring barriers, using available data and identifying new data needs where better information would help improve policy and practice.
- Identify data needs that can inform policy and practice, such as time to employment commensurate with skill level or common career pathway barriers.

“ Our workforce table brings together 20 to 30 employers. For the past 18 months, we have met monthly to discuss upcoming developments and address the workforce shortages we are experiencing.”

*—Nevada, Business
and Industry Leader*



Start With What You Have

Communities interested in strengthening workforce participation and economic competitiveness through strengthened integration capacity should begin by identifying an existing entity that can convene a diverse and robust set of partners, manage data, and coordinate implementation across systems. While states and regions vary significantly in their readiness to implement immigration and workforce strategies, many have well-established partnerships and institutional capacity, while others are just beginning to build those relationships. Communities may look to workforce boards, economic development organizations, Offices of New Americans at the municipal and state levels, regional non-profits, community-based organizations, dynamic local leaders, or other trusted intermediaries. The goal is to establish clear responsibility for cross-sector coordination and shared accountability by building on an existing and trusted organization or partnership already positioned to play that role.

An important step is to ensure a cross-sector governance group with decision-making authority, such as workforce, economic development, education, employers, licensing, labor, philanthropy, and community organizations. To build on current priorities, communities may benefit from selecting one or two industry sectors facing persistent workforce shortages and conducting a joint assessment of workforce demand, available talent, system barriers, and existing investments. This establishes a small number of shared priorities, helps outline areas of individual and shared responsibility for each action, aligns funding streams where possible, and expands on a regular process for reviewing workforce data, employer feedback, and implementation challenges. Early efforts may then continue to narrow the focus to ensure quick and meaningful wins by working first on issues such as credential recognition, licensing barriers, and employer engagement.

The collaborative could regularly surface, through existing mechanisms, where immigrant workers face delays or are underutilized, determine whether barriers require policy, funding, program, or practice changes, and better connect supports such as credential recognition, language access, career navigation, transportation, housing, and education to mainstream workforce pathways. Those insights could also create simple feedback and reporting processes so local experience and data—including time to skill-aligned employment and recurring pathway barriers—inform state and federal planning, funding, and policy decisions. Over time, this becomes a tool for identifying problems, tracking progress, and adjusting strategies as workforce and economic conditions change.



Wisconsin

By building on existing infrastructure and partnerships already positioned to play a role, work in Wisconsin demonstrates how a trusted institution can serve as a regional hub to help align workforce, education, and employer partners around common economic priorities. The result is a more connected talent system that reduces fragmentation, improves workforce access, and helps communities make better use of talent already present in the region.

In Wisconsin, like many states, workforce shortages across health care, manufacturing, and other technical occupations compound with an aging population, slowing population growth and increasing competition for talent. Recognizing that no single institution could solve these challenges alone, the Wisconsin Technical College System¹⁷ (WTCS) leveraged its existing statewide network to address these community-wide concerns. Using its existing relationships, WTCS brought together workforce boards, employers, community-based organizations, and educational institutions around shared workforce goals for priority in-demand occupations.

Using its position within the state's workforce and education ecosystem, and alongside other efforts to address workforce needs, WTCS strengthened systems and connections between employers facing talent shortages and often overlooked internationally trained professionals seeking to reconnect to careers aligned with their skills and experience.

FOCUS AREA 3:

Use Data

Regional coordination and systems change work best when they are continually informed by data. Leaders need a clear understanding of what is working, where barriers remain, what skills and workers are needed, and whether efforts to connect talent to opportunity are producing meaningful results. Without that visibility, it becomes difficult to improve systems, build support for investments, or demonstrate how strengthened integration capacity contributes to workforce and economic goals.

Most communities already collect much of the information needed to answer these questions. State and local system leaders regularly gather data on labor market conditions, workforce participation, industry demand, demographic trends, training outcomes, and economic performance. Communities don't need to collect more formal data, but they do need to connect the data they have with existing information to help leaders and community members understand what is happening on the ground and how workforce, integration, and economic outcomes relate to one another.

When communities can see where immigrant talent is successfully connected to opportunity, they can build on what works, identify workforce needs, direct resources effectively, reduce barriers that limit participation, and demonstrate the value of integration capacity. These efforts also support broader goals like economic growth and resilience.

The recommendations that follow focus on establishing practical ways to create a clearer picture of workforce conditions, integration outcomes, and economic impact. Doing so helps communities remain responsive and builds confidence that investments in integration are effective.

When communities can see where immigrant talent is successfully connected to opportunity, they can build on what works, identify workforce needs, direct resources effectively, reduce barriers that limit participation, and demonstrate the value of integration capacity. These efforts also support broader goals like economic growth and resilience.

3.1 Establish and regularly update a shared picture of local workforce conditions and integration capacity.

- Use and expand upon a common set of existing and readily available data points for boards and planning bodies to review regularly, using available reporting structures rather than creating new data systems.
- Use local trends, alongside national data, to inform decisions about where and how to focus local workforce and integration efforts, and where immigration may have its greatest impact.
- Pair labor market analysis with real-time employer data, so the shared picture of local conditions balances lagging workforce data with day-to-day experience.

3.2 Generate better insights into integration outcomes using mainstream dashboards and scorecards.

- Ensure that existing state scorecards, such as performance dashboards, talent reports, and core economic development reports that track wages, job attainment, and business investment, can measure and report outcomes for immigrant populations.
- Focus data collection on mapping trends related to workforce participation, credential alignment, and workforce system access while protecting personally identifiable information.
- Use a small, shared set of common indicators from existing reporting tools, expanding it over time as it becomes clearer which measures are most useful for planning.
- Track indicators related to skill utilization, credential recognition, and employment commensurate with education and experience to better understand whether talent is fully leveraged.

“Coming in data-driven, understanding what the workforce needs are, and then showing that the current system is not really providing it. I think that’s helpful.”

—North Carolina, Business and Industry Leader

3.3 Establish recurring data and feedback loops.

- Use state and local workforce data to align pathway design, investments, and integration strategies, recognizing and adapting to fluctuating conditions.
- Collect and regularly review information from stakeholders on changing labor market conditions, workforce needs, and implementation challenges.
- Leverage sector partnerships and regional collaboratives to gather data and information on hiring barriers, workforce system failures, service gaps, and emerging workforce trends.
- Establish routine mechanisms for immigrant-serving organizations and community-based organizations to contribute information on workforce access, service utilization, and barriers experienced by immigrant workers.
- Utilize workforce outcomes, implementation data, and stakeholder feedback to identify promising practices, emerging challenges, and opportunities for system improvement.
- Capitalize on existing economic and workforce indicators to demonstrate how immigrant workforce participation contributes to labor force growth, talent development, and broader economic prosperity.
- Use outcome and implementation data to identify effective practices and support their adoption across regions and workforce systems.





Building the Data Infrastructure to Understand and Improve Integration Outcomes

Most states and regions already collect substantial information about workforce needs through WIOA planning, labor market analysis, employer engagement, economic development activities, and sector partnerships. Turning this data into usable insights is, however, a challenge, due to a lack of coordination. Rather than create new reporting systems, communities can pull existing data into a common planning tool.

Depending on the state, different data and sources could be used. This includes job openings and vacancy rates by occupation, sector-specific skills gap analyses, training enrollment and completion rates, licensing and credential barriers, workforce participation data, wage trends, demographic indicators, talent pipeline indicators and efforts, population change, age structure, and information on English language learners or immigrant populations where available. Data sources such as unemployment insurance, commonly tracked labor statistics, workforce center outcomes, community college program data, state demographers, industry association statistics, and regulatory agency information on licensees and the licensing process could all be used. The analysis should also include structured, qualitative input from businesses, workforce boards, educational institutions, community organizations, and housing, transportation, and economic development leaders to help explain workforce and economic conditions that may not appear in datasets alone.

This information can help leaders answer practical questions. Are health care vacancies concentrated in nursing, behavioral health, or long-term care? Are internationally trained professionals living in regions experiencing worker shortages? Are licensing requirements creating workforce bottlenecks? Is a training pipeline producing enough workers to meet projected demand? Are population declines likely to worsen workforce shortages over the next decade? Where is that most acute? Answers to these questions can inform workforce investments, sector strategies, credential recognition efforts, integration capacity priorities, employer engagement strategies, and broader decisions about how immigration and immigrant talent fit into long-term workforce and economic development planning.

The goal is to pool data and perspectives to ensure that decisions are informed by a common understanding of labor market realities, demographic conditions, and community capacity.

Colorado

Colorado demonstrates¹⁸ how states can use existing workforce systems and data to better understand and support immigrant workforce participation without creating entirely new data collection systems. Colorado's workforce database, Connecting Colorado, allowed job seekers to voluntarily self-identify, in a privacy-protected manner, as "New American." This aggregate information is used by workforce centers, state workforce leaders, and partner agencies to better understand the populations accessing workforce services, where additional supports are needed, and how workforce systems can more successfully connect available talent to employer demand.

Colorado incorporated these insights into broader statewide workforce and economic priorities, including the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment's Wildly Important Goals¹⁹ to ensure that Colorado's workforce system works for New Americans and the state's Global Talent Task Force,²⁰ which includes business and economic development leaders. By embedding immigrant workforce participation into existing state priorities and accountability structures, Colorado created stronger incentives for agencies and workforce partners to align their efforts around shared workforce outcomes rather than treating immigrant integration as a separate initiative.

Colorado's example illustrates how states can use existing resources to improve service delivery and outcomes for traditionally underserved populations, including immigrants, within mainstream workforce systems.

FOCUS AREA 4:

Strategically Invest in Integration Capacity

Regional and state data can inform and align existing funding and investments, encouraging communities to strengthen integration capacity within mainstream workforce systems and build accountability for measurable outcomes. However, communities need institutional capacity and sustained investment that is designed to turn talent into economic contribution.

Public investment aimed at strengthening integration capacity is often fragmented, tied to short-term grant cycles, unstable, or designed to respond to immediate needs rather than build lasting institutional capacity. As a result, communities often rely on temporary programs that disappear when funding ends, instead of developing durable partnerships, staffing, and coordination needed to consistently connect eligible immigrants with workforce opportunities. To treat integration capacity as a strategic economic asset, we must move from intermittent funding to sustained investment for medium- to long-term growth. States already invest in workforce and economic development, education, and infrastructure to expand labor force participation and strengthen regional competitiveness. This approach can be applied to integration capacity: an investment that helps communities achieve their economic and workforce goals.

The recommendations in this section focus on the ways in which new and existing funding streams can be more effectively deployed to attract talent, support employers, and strengthen integration capacity over the long term.

4.1 Align funding streams around integration capacity as a shared economic goal.

- Align existing public and philanthropic funding around complementary, shared goals and measurable outcomes for integration capacity and workforce participation, rather than managing each stream in isolation.

- Prioritize investments that build long-term system capacity, including credential recognition supports, data systems, and training for staff and employers.
- Encourage communities to braid and coordinate existing funds across workforce supports to build durable, scalable infrastructure instead of stand-alone projects.
- Explicitly recognize integration services as a routine part of mainstream workforce programs and encourage and incentivize their use within existing state and federal funding authorities whenever allowable.

4.2 Use incentives and other creative funding mechanisms to support communities in building integration infrastructure.

- Design funding opportunities, contract awards, and performance incentives so they prioritize communities that are building durable integration systems and capacity.
- Incentivize investments in career pathways, talent recognition efforts, and integration supports that strengthen regional talent pipelines.
- Build workforce participation, skill utilization, and integration outcomes into funding criteria, procurement rules, and grant scoring so resources flow towards systems that are testing and improving integration approaches.
- Tie funding opportunities to actionable regional integration plans that advance workforce and economic development priorities.
- Support pilot programs that test pathway models, coordination approaches, and integration strategies under real workforce conditions, with mechanisms for sharing lessons across regions.

4.3 Use flexible and consistent funding structures that can adapt to changing workforce and economic conditions.

- Replace one-year or single-purpose grants with multi-year funding that lets communities and states plan, retain institutional knowledge, and build locally attuned integration infrastructure through longer grant cycles.

- Shift from narrow grants to flexible funding tools that allow states and regions to reallocate resources as local labor market needs evolve.
- Tie funding renewals to progress against clear measurable outcomes, such as skills and credential recognition and job outcomes, so sustained support goes to systems that improve over time.
- Reserve a share of funds in planning or implementation grants so that states and regions can move quickly and credibly when data show emerging workforce and economic gaps.
- Allow communities flexibility to test and adapt integration approaches without losing funding when workforce and economic conditions change.

4.4 Connect integration investment to broader investments in workforce infrastructure such as housing, transportation, education, and health care.

- Coordinate workforce investments with regional housing, transportation, health care, education, and economic development strategies so that integration capacity is built into community growth planning, rather than added on after the fact.
- Use local workforce and integration conditions to target investments where more communities can benefit from integration and make those opportunities visible to systems partners and potential investors.
- Clearly define eligible integration investments, focusing on core areas such as housing, transportation, education, health, and workforce programs.





Using Competitive Grants to Build Integration Capacity

Many communities recognize that workforce growth, population stability, and economic competitiveness increasingly depend on their ability to attract, retain, and integrate immigrant workers and families. Yet the systems that support workforce participation, including housing, workforce navigation, credential recognition, education, health care access, and employer partnerships, are often funded separately and developed unevenly across regions. Competitive grant programs can help communities build this capacity before workforce shortages become economic constraints.

One approach is to create grants that reward communities for demonstrating readiness to connect and attract immigrant workers and families to economic opportunity. Rather than funding isolated programs, grants could support regional talent attraction and integration plans that are informed by regional hubs that prioritize cross-sector representation from workforce boards, business and industry partners, educational institutions, health care systems, housing partners, economic development organizations, and community-based organizations. These plans could identify workforce priorities, capacity constraints, and specific investments needed to strengthen long-term workforce participation and regional competitiveness.

Funding criteria might prioritize investments that strengthen workforce and community infrastructure, such as workforce navigation, credential recognition, English language learning, adult education, housing capacity, employer partnerships, and health care access. It should also reward regional plans that include employer commitments, sector partnerships, training or upskilling strategies, and measurable outcomes such as time-to-fill, retention, reduced turnover, credential completion, and wage progression. Communities could also be rewarded for creating durable coordination structures, strong shared accountability measures, and interconnected systems.

By creating clear incentives for planning, coordination, and capacity-building, competitive grants can help reward early adopters to move integration from a collection of disconnected programs to a core workforce and economic development strategy. Like other investments in workforce infrastructure, these efforts help communities respond more effectively to demographic change, workforce shortages, and long-term economic opportunities while strengthening outcomes for workers, employers, and residents alike.



Indiana

In Evansville,²¹ Indiana, a federal incentive helped unite local organizations into a more coordinated local system. The University of Evansville brought together schools, non-profits, health and social service providers, and other institutions around a shared cradle-to-career strategy for children and families. The grant provided funding, but it also required the community to define common goals, use data to track progress, and clarify how partners would work together rather than continue operating as separate programs.

There are many lessons to learn from federal initiatives and capacity strengthening efforts such as Promise Neighborhoods, Race to the Top, Safe Schools/Healthy Students, and Opportunity Zones. Each used a different mechanism, but all sought to encourage state and local actors to organize around shared priorities. By establishing expectations and offering funding or investment incentives, the federal government prompted communities to assess needs, align institutions and resources, and develop strategies. None of these programs were perfect, but they offer useful insights for incentivizing communities to collaborate and strengthen capacity.

This model could also strengthen integration capacity. Federal or state governments could provide planning and implementation grants to communities that bring together workforce agencies, employers, educational institutions, immigrant-serving organizations, and local leaders around a shared strategy. Rather than supporting isolated services, grants could reward communities for building partnerships, data practices, and implementation capacity to recognize and connect immigrant talent with local workforce and economic needs.





PILLAR 2:

Design Immigration Pathways with Successful Integration in Mind

**IMMIGRATION WORKS BEST
WHEN INTEGRATION IS BUILT IN**

Pillar 1 outlined recommendations to help communities strengthen the integration capacity needed to better translate immigrant talent into economic and workforce priorities. This pillar builds on that foundation. Rather than treating integration and immigration as separate domains, it asks how the lessons from building integration capacity can be applied to the design of immigration pathways and policies themselves and how we can better connect these systems to maximize the mutual benefit that communities and immigrants realize.

“Immigration” is often used as an adjective—immigration policy, immigration pathway, immigration system—because it describes the structures that govern who comes to the country, under what terms, and with what opportunities. In this framework, we use terms broadly rather than prescriptively. We are less concerned with whether the right noun is policy, pathway, program, process, or system than with whether the ideas could be useful. These ideas are meant to be applied so that they can produce stronger outcomes for immigrants, communities, and the country.

Immigration policy is designed to achieve particular national objectives, including (though not limited to) family reunification, humanitarian obligations, and economic or workforce needs. The focus is on eligibility and admission, rather than on what happens once people arrive. Effectiveness depends on both who is admitted and how the entry pathway and policies function in practice. Considerations such as portability, predictability, connection to employers and workforce systems, opportunities for advancement, and the ability to adapt to changing conditions are all design choices that could strengthen immigration outcomes.

Successful outcomes for immigrants occur when their skills and experience are recognized and connected to opportunity, whether they are essential workers filling critical roles in manufacturing and health care or meeting documented workforce needs in technology and other sectors. Employers benefit from access to qualified workers and communities thrive when they can support and deploy talent effectively. These principles should inform the design of immigration pathways, which should be evaluated not only on eligibility but on whether they enable long-term success for immigrants, employers, and communities.

Immigration ultimately produces outcomes in communities. People work, develop new skills, raise families, participate in civic life, and contribute to local economies regardless of the pathway through which they arrive. Those outcomes depend not only on admissions itself, but also on the systems that receive people once they arrive. Rather than treating integration as something that begins after immigration policy has done its work, policymakers should recognize successful integration as one of the intended outcomes of the pathway design itself. Without

stronger alignment between immigration policy and integration systems, many immigrants must navigate fragmented institutions, limiting both individual opportunity and broader economic benefits.

Designing with integration in mind requires considering how pathways interact with workforce systems, regional economies, demographic realities, and long-term economic priorities. Successful integration is inseparable from immigration policy—it determines whether immigration achieves its intended purpose. The recommendations that follow are organized around three connected focus areas, each addressed in this chapter.

Successful integration is inseparable from immigration policy. It determines whether immigration achieves its intended purpose.

First, the same efforts that inform integration can help shape better immigration systems. The methods to build integration capacity in Pillar One are key to making immigration work better. Once communities have identified ways to hardwire integration into workforce systems, collect state and local input, utilize data, and make strategic investments, learnings and insights can be incorporated into the design of new and existing immigration pathways, allowing state and local actors, including business and industry, to be co-architects of immigration policy alongside their federal peers.

Second, immigration pathways should include design elements that foster successful integration outcomes. People arrive differently, but they ultimately participate in the same labor markets, workforce systems, educational institutions, and communities. Designing with an emphasis on connecting to systems and adapting to evolving workforce and economic priorities can help communities fully utilize existing talent and improve future outcomes.

And third, immigration pathways should be measurable, accountable, and responsive to communities. Public confidence increases when pathways are visibly connected to workforce and economic outcomes, with clear evidence of their performance over time. Measuring outcomes, incorporating feedback, and adjusting as conditions change keep pathways responsive and aligned with the goals they are intended to serve.

“ I would love for there to be ways for states that want and need more immigrant workers to raise their hand and be more of a receptive state in a way that doesn’t also create negative incentives going the other way.”

—New Mexico,
Community Leader

The recommendations that follow translate these principles into practical design considerations for current and future immigration pathways and policies. Together, they reflect that successful immigration depends not only on who arrives, but whether immigration pathways and policies are designed to help people, employers, and communities succeed over the long term.

FOCUS AREA 1:

Bring Integration into Immigration Policy Design

Adopting the recommendations in Pillar One creates the integration capacity for immigration to work well. Doing so allows immigrant workers to find good jobs that match their skills and experience sooner and helps employers fill vacancies faster. In the same way that on-the-ground expertise and data are important for building integration capacity, state and local inputs should also play a role in shaping immigration systems and designing how immigration and workforce systems connect for individuals.

The recommendations that follow focus on how the efforts to build integration capacity can also inform the design of immigration pathways.

2.1 Leverage State and Local Expertise and Integration Capacity to Strengthen Immigration Policy

- Co-design immigration policies with state and local partners, leveraging their expertise to better align immigration policy with workforce needs, integration capacity, and long-term integration and economic outcomes.

- Incentivize strengthening integration capacity through state and local workforce and economic planning, system design, and investment decisions, and reward such efforts through more streamlined connections to immigration pathways and newly arrived immigrants.
- Identify where labor shortages, immigrant underemployment, and immigrant populations overlap in key sectors and locations, and use that information to guide how pathways are used, designed, and improved.
- Treat employers, trade associations, sector partnerships, and workforce boards as recurring co-design partners, because they can identify persistent shortages, validate whether pathway requirements are workable, and help connect workers to lawful employment, training, and retention supports.
- Identify priority occupations and sectors where domestic labor exists but will be insufficient, and use that data to inform the design and scale of immigration pathways.
- Position funding and incentives to build durable integration capacity by prioritizing multi-year and flexible grants, rewarding success and innovation, and enabling multi-sector coordination.
- Build simple feedback loops that connect local, state, and federal data and experience, so information from employers, workers, and communities can guide adjustments to pathways and arrivals.

“ Even though immigration is a federal issue, states should have an engagement plan to make sure the federal government understands the needs of states, especially around economic development and workforce.”

—Utah, Community Leader



Pilot and Evaluate New Models

Because workforce conditions, integration capacity, and regional realities vary across communities, policymakers should not assume that any single model will function equally well everywhere or under all conditions. Many of these approaches are relatively new in the U.S., even as other countries have tested regional, sector-based, and workforce-informed strategies that offer useful lessons.

Pilots can help states, businesses, workforce systems, and communities test models, implementation structures, and coordination approaches under real conditions, and learn and refine pathways before broader scaling.

Federal policymakers could test multiple workforce- and community-informed pathways. These may include expanding existing immigration pathways or testing new models, such as sector-based essential worker pilots, state-based and state-led models tailored to local needs and goals, or occupational- or regional-based immigration pathways. Pilots could target areas with workforce shortages, communities building integration capacity, regions with sidelined immigrant workers, and places seeking more immigrants or long-term economic vitality. Co-designing these pilots with states, regions, and system leaders, and including the necessary investments and incentives, will support successful implementation and participation.

“ I believe in the laboratories of democracy. I could see states being more open to pilot programs permitted under federal law, without having to implement them everywhere.”

—North Carolina, Business and Industry Leader

Through these varied pilots, policymakers can compare which structures best align economic and workforce priorities, which structures consider state and local integration capacity, and which structures work well for employers, communities, and immigrants alike. Pilots can test models that include eligibility for potential and long-term immigrant residents, implementation structures, and coordination approaches under real workforce and community conditions before broader scaling. Over time, this allows systems to learn, adapt, and refine pathways based on experience, workforce outcomes, and changing economic realities.



Canada

Canada's Provincial Nominee Program²² (PNP) illustrates how governments can use pilots to test new approaches before expanding nationally. Launched in the late 1990s with a few provinces, the program let provincial governments nominate immigrants whose skills matched regional labor needs, while the federal government retained authority over admissions and immigration policy.

Instead of a single nationwide model, the program expanded incrementally. Provinces experimented, refined employer partnerships, and adapted as economic conditions changed. Lessons from implementation informed broader policy decisions, and the PNP evolved²³ into one of Canada's main economic immigration pathways.

While the U.S. has a different system, the underlying lesson is applicable: Complex immigration reforms benefit from limited-scale pilots, outcome evaluation, and policy refinement before wider adoption. Well-designed pilots generate evidence, strengthen local integration, and identify governance structures needed to balance federal oversight with regional needs.

Piloting new pathways in the U.S. could help policymakers identify which combinations of federal policy, state leadership, workforce systems, and partnerships produce the strongest outcomes before broader adoption. Learning from implementation, rather than assuming one model fits all, enables more responsive immigration pathways that still meet national goals and standards.

FOCUS AREA 2:

Design Responsive Pathways That Facilitate Successful Integration

The design principles that follow are intended to guide the creation, improvement, and administration of immigration pathways in ways that support successful integration and strengthen integration capacity. Rather than prescribing changes or referring to individual existing or future processes, these recommendations offer a framework that federal policymakers can apply across legislation, regulations, administrative processes, and the design of immigration pathways.

The recommendations that follow focus on ideas to use integration efforts and tables to inform immigration priorities.

2.2 Link Immigration Processes More Intentionally to Workforce and Integration Infrastructure to Ensure Long-Term Economic Outcomes

- Foster connection to workforce boards, WIOA planning processes, regional hubs, sector partnerships, American Job Centers, and economic development strategies so that systems reinforce rather than operate separately from one another.
- Link admissions and pre- and post-arrival processes directly to workforce intake systems, such as through skills assessments or credential evaluation, so workers can transition more efficiently into jobs aligned with their skills and experience without delay.
- Modify existing pathways and processes to connect more directly to the workforce system, business, and industry so that workers can move into skill-aligned roles more efficiently.
- Build systems that have “on-ramps” so that people can enter at different points based on their skills and credentials, move between training and employment, respond to emerging labor demands, and progress as their readiness and experience grow.
- Create recurring operational feedback loops among workforce systems, businesses, education institutions, labor, community organizations, and regional leaders so that workforce gaps, implementation barriers, and community concerns can be identified and addressed as conditions evolve.
- Integrate workforce systems into the immigration process, from pre-arrival through advancement, including credential evaluation, skills assessment, training, job matching, and data analysis to better connect immigrants to in-demand jobs.

“ I think the business community needs to take the issue into its own hands.... We have literally sat down with economists, done the math, and said, look, we’ve got a choice. Do we bring folks into the country to help us with our labor issues, or do we push some of this work offshore?”

—North Carolina, Business and Industry Leader

2.3 Align Immigration Systems with Workforce and Economic Priorities and Realities

- Ensure that efforts to improve immigration pathways decisions operate alongside strategies that strengthen domestic labor force participation and workforce development, so that immigration processes complement broader workforce and economic priorities.
- Design pathways that can be demand-driven and adaptive, with the ability to respond to labor market information, scale up or down, and adjust as needs change and as informed by real-time input and data.
- Use clear, accessible, and predictable structures so communities and employers understand timelines, administrative realities, and status changes, and can plan for new and arriving workers.
- Include strong labor market safeguards and incentives such as market-aligned wages and job quality standards, to protect all workers and complement domestic labor.
- Include routes to longer-term status and stability for existing immigrant residents in recognition that they contribute to shared workforce and economic goals, so that our systems reward contribution and show visible economic benefit.
- Build greater portability, flexibility, and adaptability into existing and future pathway and policy design where possible so that workers and businesses can respond more effectively to changing workforce and economic priorities.



Using the Pre-Arrival Window as a Talent Coordination Tool

While most workforce and integration efforts begin after immigrants arrive in a community, the step between application approval and arrival is a window of opportunity. Rather than viewing pre-arrival processes solely as eligibility and screening functions, policymakers can use this window to better connect workforce demand, integration capacity, and arriving talent, without disrupting the admissions process writ large.

A practical first step is to collect a limited set of information during pre-arrival processing, such as education, work experience, professional licenses, technical and soft skills, and language abilities. The information collected should reflect both the purpose of admission and workforce needs. Rather than part of the immigration approval process, this data could be routed to labor, integration, and workforce partners to better connect immigrants to economic opportunity and in-demand jobs. The data could be mapped to standard U.S. occupational and industry frameworks, such as [O*NET](#)²⁴ and [NAICS](#),²⁵ so that immigrants' experience and skills can be more readily understood by workforce systems, employers, and community institutions.

At a minimum, shared in aggregate and through required privacy-protective processes, this information could help state and local partners anticipate arriving talent, prepare integration capacity such as credential recognition and training, and connect newcomers to opportunities that make full use of their technical expertise and transferable skills.

Leaders can use the pre-arrival period to share workforce opportunities, credential evaluation providers, and community assets with prospective arrivals. Workforce and economic development leaders already maintain information on occupational demand, and workforce shortages. Incorporating this into pre-arrival planning helps immigrants make more informed decisions, including where to live.

The goal is to connect information that governments, employers, individuals, and communities already have to improve workforce matching, strengthen local planning and integration capacity, accelerate credential recognition and workforce participation, and help communities prepare for successful integration before arrival.



Utah

Utah has long argued that immigration pathways should better connect to workforce systems and economic conditions. In 2011 and extended in 2026, the state enacted a guest worker program and the Utah Pilot Sponsored Resident Immigrant Program,²⁶ envisioning a state-administered role in identifying eligible participants and connecting them to employment, education, and community institutions. Although the programs weren't implemented because they required federal authorization, they reflected an important principle: Federal immigration pathways can work better if they are informed by state and local workforce priorities and linked to integration systems.

A modern state-responsive model could connect participants to workforce boards, credential evaluation, skills assessment, education, employers, and career advancement from pre-arrival through longer-term participation. It could also require states to demonstrate workforce need alongside investments in domestic recruitment and workforce development, establish clear timelines and employer responsibilities, and adjust occupational or regional priorities as conditions change. Strong wage, job quality, portability, and worker protection standards would help ensure that it complements the domestic workforce while giving workers and employers predictability and flexibility.

Utah's experience offers evidence of a state's sustained eagerness for a more meaningful role in immigration policy. Utah leaders have signaled a willingness to identify workforce needs, coordinate employers and institutions, and connect immigrants to opportunity. Federal policymakers can build on that readiness by creating lawful, structured ways for states to shape priorities while maintaining national admissions standards, worker protections, and routes to longer-term status.

FOCUS AREA 3:

Make Immigration Pathways Measurable, Accountable, and Responsive to Communities

Public confidence in immigration pathways depends both on their design and on whether people see that they are working as intended. Making success visible requires communicating outcomes and accountability. Measuring outcomes creates opportunities for learning and improvement, helps identify implementation challenges before they become larger problems, and provides an opportunity to co-design solutions. All together, these efforts can move public discussions beyond assumptions and anecdotes by demonstrating how pathways and policies can benefit communities.

“ Immigration should not be a partisan issue. It has always been supported by both sides, and we really need to come back to that. It is about what is best for our community and our economy as a whole.”

—Utah, Community Leader

The recommendations that follow focus on using metrics and accountability to build the public buy-in that leads to durable immigration systems.

2.4 Strengthen Public Confidence and Pathway Success Through Measurable Outcomes

- Consider, as a component of success, immigration pathways' ability to connect workers to jobs, training, and supports in state and local communities, not just in terms of national labor market averages.
- Use existing administrative, employer, and workforce data to track individual and community outcomes over time, such as employment, earnings, retention, time-to-fill vacancies, number of unfilled shifts, and tax contributions, to show both immediate and longer-term impacts.

- Establish a small, shared set of core measures that states and regions use consistently, including labor market indicators like time-to-fill jobs and retention, plus a few broader integration benchmarks, so performance is comparable.
- Build simple feedback loops that connect local, state, and federal data and experience, so that information from employers, workers, and communities can guide regular and visible adjustments.
- Go beyond employment counts to track local service stability and broader community effects, including whether pathways help communities stay strong, attract talent, and share economic gains more widely.
- Pair outcome data with clear stories and trusted messengers who can explain how pathways are working, highlight successes, and address concerns, so the public can see both the numbers and the lived experience.
- Use workforce insights, labor market data, and formal input from states, localities, and businesses and industry to improve the pathways and connect workers more systemically to economic opportunities and needs.

“ Grounding the conversation in workforce data, employer need, and fiscal impact gives audiences something concrete and reduces the opportunity for purely partisan responses.”

*—North Carolina, Business
and Industry Leader*



A Workforce Connected Immigration Policy

While no current program offers a complete blueprint, existing models provide ideas and examples. One of those, the [Conrad 30](#)²⁷ program, offers useful lessons and ideas of how an immigration pathway can be tied to specific workforce and community objectives. It was designed to allow each state to recommend waivers for up to 30 international medical graduates who completed U.S. training in [J-1](#)²⁸ status and would otherwise be required to spend two years outside the country.

Nebraska has
sponsored
344 physicians.

[Nebraska](#)²⁹ has used administrative records, physician surveys, and workforce data to examine the program's longer-term results. Since 2001, the state has sponsored 344 physicians and tracked their specialties, practice locations, tenure, and retention. Nebraska has supplemented these administrative measures with [PRISM](#)³⁰ survey data examining physicians' professional experiences, relationships with employers and communities, work-life conditions, and intentions to remain after completing their service commitments. Together, these sources can help the state understand not only whether physicians remain, but also which employment and community conditions contribute to higher retention rates and therefore better outcomes for communities, employers, and individuals.

This approach illustrates how workforce-informed immigration policies could be evaluated more broadly. Federal and state partners, alongside business and industry partners, could establish a small, shared set of measures, including time-to-fill positions, wages and job quality, populations served, and workers' and families' experiences in receiving communities. Privacy-protective links among immigration, licensing, employer, and workforce data could show whether a policy is meeting verified needs and producing durable benefits. Regular reporting and feedback from workers, employers, and communities, such as through regional hubs, could then guide visible adjustments, strengthening both the immigration pathway and the public's confidence in it.



Michigan

Michigan's quarterly refugee consultations show how an existing immigration system can be paired with a practical structure for measuring results, interpreting local conditions, and improving implementation. The [Office of Global Michigan](#),³¹ like other state refugee offices across the nation, convenes consultations quarterly, with regional meetings across the state. Resettlement agencies participate alongside state and local government, schools, public health agencies, law enforcement, immigrant leaders, and community-based organizations.

Michigan pairs this local feedback with measurable outcomes. The state uses data from refugee service providers, including data on arrivals, job placement, average wages, job retention, and job upgrades, to inform continual program improvements and increase awareness about the role refugees play in meeting local workforce needs. Quarterly consultations provide a forum for local partners and communities to help interpret such results, provide additional insights, and adopt systems-level changes that can improve accessibility for other underserved populations.

Federal policymakers could build on the refugee resettlement model by establishing a small set of comparable national, state, and regional measures and using quarterly consultations to review the findings with workers, employers, workforce systems, service providers, and community representatives. For the refugee program, that feedback could inform placement practices, workforce connections, funding, employer engagement, and integration supports. Applied to other immigration systems, it could guide adjustments to design, including flexibility due to changing economic conditions, and the investments and other supports available. Pairing transparent data with trusted local interpretation and insights would allow the public to see not only how many people enter a pathway, but also how it is producing lasting benefits.

Conclusion

The workforce and demographic pressures facing the U.S. will not disappear on their own. Neither will the consequences of systems that leave qualified people underemployed, employers without the talent they need, and communities unable to plan confidently for the future. But these challenges do not have to define what comes next.

This framework offers a more connected path forward. Communities need the systems, partnerships, and infrastructure to recognize immigrant talent and connect it to opportunity. Immigration pathways, in turn, should be designed to work with those systems—drawing on state and local knowledge, responding to changing conditions, providing stability, and producing outcomes that are visible to the communities they affect. When integration capacity and immigration policy reinforce one another, both become more effective.

That matters not only for economic growth, but also for public confidence. Immigration debates will remain polarized as long as people believe the system is disconnected from local realities, unable to adapt, or incapable of demonstrating results. Confidence is built when systems are pragmatic, accountable, and responsive; when communities can see that workforce needs are being addressed; and when immigrants have a fair opportunity to contribute their skills, support their families, and build a future.

Solutions to these common challenges can and should be tailored to the specific needs of different communities. Creating systems capable of balancing multiple national priorities while producing stronger outcomes in practice is the key to a more promising future. That requires investment in the domestic workforce, recognition of immigrant talent, respect for the values that undergird our immigration system such as family reunification, and immigration pathways that are designed with long-term success in mind.

The central lesson is simple: Immigration and integration are already connected in the lives of workers, employers, families, and communities. Our policies should reflect that reality. By building systems that work together, the U.S. can strengthen its workforce, sustain essential services, expand opportunity, and create a more durable foundation for shared prosperity.

Thank You

From the outset, this framework was informed by a council of trusted experts and state and local leaders across the country. We believe that important ideas are strengthened when they are tested by thoughtful people with different experiences, expertise, and perspectives. We thank all our collaborators who reflected one of the framework's central premises: that successful immigration and integration depend on the interaction of many different systems and actors. We especially thank Annie Fenton for her work supporting the council's contributions. We hope this framework reflects that same spirit by helping to connect conversations that are too often separate, and by encouraging a more integrated approach to immigration, workforce development, and community success. If you'd like to learn more or partner with WES, email us at: us_policy@wes.org.







About World Education Services

World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit social enterprise that supports the educational, economic, and social inclusion of immigrants, refugees, and international students. For more than 50 years, WES has set the standard for international academic credential evaluation, supporting millions of people as they seek to achieve their academic and professional goals. Through decades of experience as a leader in global education, WES has developed a wide range of tools to pursue social impact at scale. From evaluating academic credentials to shaping policy, designing programs, and providing philanthropic funding, we partner with a diverse set of organizations, leaders, and networks to uplift individuals and drive systems change. Together with its partners, WES enables people to learn, work, and thrive in new places.

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