

COMMUNITY COLLEGE TIMES

Immigrants with degrees struggle to find jobs in their fields

BY MATTHEW DEMBICKI, *Published December 11, 2009*

Liliana Arteaga came to the U.S. last year, eager to work in the field in which she earned her bachelor's degree: architecture. The Colombian native soon found that it wasn't so easy to land a job in her field.

"I don't think I can use my degree here," she said, noting that it is complicated to get an architect license in the U.S., which partly requires an assessment of the degree she earned in Colombia.

Soo Ah Lee arrived in the U.S. from Korea earlier this year with a master's degree in history. However, she struggles speaking English, which has made it difficult to find a job. So she has enrolled in an English as a second language (ESL) course at a community college to help her eventually find a job in the U.S.

Both women represent a growing trend in the U.S.: Immigrants with professional degrees who cannot work in their fields. For some immigrants, it's because institutions don't recognize degrees from their countries, making it difficult to earn a license or certification to work here. For others, there is a language barrier. And some immigrants simply can't work through the procedural maze to get their degrees or credits approved.

Arteaga and Lee were among about 250 students and local residents who attended a free seminar at [Northern Virginia Community College \(NVCC\)](#) on Thursday to help immigrants to apply their education and job experiences to find jobs in the U.S.

The crowd of people from all backgrounds didn't surprise officials from NVCC, which serves the greater Washington, D.C., area. Nearly a quarter of the residents in the area were born in another country, with almost 40 percent of families speaking another language at home, said NVCC President Robert Templin.

Running into people such as Arteaga and Lee is not uncommon, Templin said. He noted during his recent visit to a health care facility, the technician taking his vital signs was a licensed physician in his country, but that license wasn't recognized in the U.S. And during a recent cab ride, the driver told Templin that he had a degree in software development, but his degree didn't transfer to the U.S.

"We have a tremendous reservoir of credentials, but people don't have ways to cash them in," said Templin, after nearly half the audience raised their hands

when he asked how many had earned higher education degrees in other countries.

Of the 6 million immigrants in the U.S. with a bachelor's degree or higher, more than 1.3 million are unemployed or working in unskilled jobs, according to the [Migration Policy Institute](#).

Part of the problem is that there isn't a central government agency or another institution, as in some other countries, for approving degrees and licenses from other countries that all colleges and businesses can rely on, said Paul Feltman, director of community engagement at [World Education Services](#) (WES), a New York-based nonprofit that evaluates credentials. With each college or organization setting its own rules for recognition and acceptance of degrees or skills, it's easy for students to get confused and disheartened, he said.

But immigrants can continue to work in their field, even though it may not be in the occupation in which they have their degrees. Feltman recommended that immigrants consider earning an associate degree in a similar field or take ESL courses at a community college, even if they are waiting for their degree or credits to be assessed. Doing so allows students to develop a professional network, sharpens or updates their skills and shows potential employers that they can succeed at a U.S. college.

Feltman also recommended that immigrant students find an internship or volunteer to search for job opportunities and to build networks. He added that he recognizes students often don't have the luxury of working for free and are pressed for time, but getting work experience in the U.S. is critical.

"Think of it as an investment rather than as a cause," Feltman said.

That's a model followed at NVCC. Jennifer Lucy, program developer of workforce development at NVCC's [Medical Education Campus](#), said that she's seen a spike over the past few years in physicians from other countries enrolled in the college's medical programs. Often, these students are encouraged to take courses familiar to them, such as pharmacy technology, to attain a job in a related field. The next step is usually to work at a hospital or health care facility, which allows them to work in a related professional field, and they can also receive tuition reimbursement if they want to continue with their education.

The event was sponsored by NVCC, WES and the [Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education](#) at [Westchester Community College](#) (New York).

Click [here](#) for Feltman's PowerPoint presentation.

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