

## **“Is Anybody Doing Anything?”**

### **Policy Actors Discuss Supports for Displaced Learners at Ohio’s Colleges and Universities**

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#### **Abstract**

According to UNHCR (2023), 6% of refugees currently access higher education worldwide. In light of this pressing equity crisis, it is

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important to understand the policies currently in place to support displaced learners across national and regional landscapes. Using Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) and applying an intersectional lens, this paper analyzes a single US state context, Ohio, and finds a pervasive policy silence identified by policy actors based at colleges and universities. This policy gap spans federal, state, and institutional levels, consistent with nascent literature on the US policy context (Luu & Blanco, 2021; Unangst et al. 2022). Our discussion focuses on higher education access policies, pointing to a lack of consistency in the language used by both policy and policy actors around displaced students. Further, we address the implications of “incidental” policy and programmatic support being provided to displaced students via established student service infrastructures rather than targeted or intentional support. We also explore how external funders do and may influence the development of policy centering displaced learners.

## Introduction

In the last decade humanitarian crises have displaced millions of people across the globe. In the United States (US) it was estimated that 95,000 Afghans would be resettled by September 2022, with the executive branch requesting \$6.4 billion in Congressional allocations to support that resettlement process (Young, 2021). Tens of thousands of Ukrainians—and others fleeing that country—were also admitted to the US in 2022 (The White House, 2022). These individuals joined an estimated 325,000 Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders (that figure being current as of 2017) (Warren and Kerwin, 2017), in addition to 100,000 refugees admitted between fiscal years 2017-2020 (Baugh, 2022). Over 100,000 individuals were also granted asylum either affirmatively or defensively between 2019-2020; this figure excludes follow-to-join asylees (Baugh, 2022). Together, the concentration of displaced persons in the US is at the highest level since the end of the Vietnam war, with the individuals in question holding a range of legal statuses, e.g., refugee, parolee, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV), and TPS (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2021). Still others were US residents at the time of conflict in their home country and have applied for asylum, attempting to move from, for example, a student visa to a protected status.

How many displaced students are enrolled at US Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)? No comprehensive data set is presently available to answer this question; displaced individuals enter the US at every life stage, with new arrivals of “traditional” college-going age seeking to access higher education shortly after resettlement, childhood arrivals completing elementary and secondary education in the US before

pursuing college, and adults accessing education to retrain, to qualify for their profession in the American context, or to improve language skills (Unangst et al., 2022). Further, the legal status of displaced learners may change prior to or during college enrollment: refugees, for example, may “apply for lawful permanent resident status after 1 year in the United States” (USCIS, 2019).

Broadly, then, what can we say about the number of displaced people present in the US? In short, there is a significant grouping of displaced learners who might pursue higher education in the US, yet this population has been the focal point of limited scholarship. To our knowledge, the project at hand is the first attempt to capture the breadth of formal and informal policies supporting college access among displaced learners holding intersectional identities across a single state context: Ohio.

### **Framing Numbers**

It is useful to offer a few framing statistics pointing to higher education pathways in Ohio, the country’s seventh-most populous state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). New American Economy (2017, 2021) has estimated that 64,261 refugees were resident in Ohio as of 2021, and that in 2015, refugees contributed 102.5 million dollars in state and local tax revenue. Between 2016-18, the top five sending countries for Ohio-based refugees were: Bhutan (30.6%), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (22.3%), Somalia (12.6%), Syria (10.3%) and Iraq (5.6%). As of 2019, most refugees in Ohio lived in five counties hosting large cities: Cuyahoga, Franklin, Hamilton, Montgomery, and Summit (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, 2021). In 2018, the state accepted the third most refugees nationally in absolute numbers (National Immigration Forum, 2020). Between 2017-2019, 1,077 Ohio residents were granted asylum affirmatively (Baugh, 2020), and as of 2018, 7.4% of all Somalian Temporary Protected Status holders in the country resided in Ohio (The Temporary Protected Status Advocacy Working Group, 2021). In short, considering those with approved, pending, and temporary status as well as their minor children, Ohio likely hosts tens of thousands of displaced individuals seeking access to some type of higher education in the state; the US State Department’s (2023) decision to authorize private refugee sponsorship is likely to drive this figure still higher. Indeed, as of fall 2018, 75.6% of students at Ohio HEIs were state residents (Ruiz, 2020).

### **Comparative Context**

Armed conflicts, environmental crises, and other drivers in the last ten years have resulted in the highest number of displaced people worldwide since the end of the second world war (UNHCR, 2014). Waves of displaced learners have catalyzed the creation of a menu of services across HEIs globally: credential evaluation, language training via pathway programs, buddy and mentoring programs, the opportunity to audit classes, and so forth (e.g., Hartley et al., 2018; Sontag, 2019). Further, regional compacts have been established relevant to higher education access (e.g., Sarmiento, 2014).

Comparative national cases reflect a range of policy approaches to supporting displaced learners. In response to the Ukrainian crisis, 44 British universities (as of May 2022) had engaged in twinning programs with Ukrainian universities, sharing virtual lectures and providing materials to rebuild physical infrastructure (Fazackerley, 2022), though at the national level Ukrainian students were first told that they would be treated “the same as a UK resident for higher education funding,” which would still have meant thousands of pounds per year in tuition (UK Government, 2022), followed by the announcement of four million in federal funding to be issued directly to HEIs with Ukrainian or Ukrainian-domiciled students enrolled (Office for Students, 2022). The Austrian national system, in contrast, established a tuition waiver spanning all public universities and university colleges of teacher education (Federal Ministry of Austria Education Science and Research, 2022). A 2019 Eurydice report examining 22 European systems of higher education found that 19 national policies did not address this population at all (European Commission et al., p. 13). In the German case, a comprehensive policy response utilized prior learning assessment, “bridging programmes, guidance and counselling services and financial support” tied to specific budget allocations to support this group (European Commission et al., 2019, p. 13). In response to Syrian displacement, the Turkish higher education system initiated Arabic-language degree programs on the Syrian border, offering both tuition-free status as well as scholarships to refugee students (a policy so generous that backlash from domestic students ensued) (Ergin et al., 2019).

While the decentralized US higher education system has generally failed to engage in policy innovation in response to the needs of displaced learners, it is not alone in this regard. In the Australian setting one may observe a gap between policy supports for approved refugees and asylees and those with pending status: asylum-seekers “are treat-

ed as international students and are ineligible for Federal Government financial assistance programs (Hartley et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2019)” leaving 23 of 43 Australian HEIs to offer stopgap institutional scholarships to “refugees and asylum-seeking students” (Dunwoodie et al., 2020, p. 5). Similarly, while the German system has been lauded for its comparatively robust investment in refugee education, persistent service gaps remain: public university webpages aimed at displaced learners are predominantly in German only (rather than offering parallel content in Arabic, Pashto, etc.) and largely center cis-gender men (Unangst, 2020). Relevant calls for policy attention to the intersectional identities of displaced youth have begun to appear across the nationally-focused literatures and in comparative work alike (e.g., Moffit et al., 2020; Molla, 2020; Kuzhabekova & Nardon, 2021): Fincham (2022) has referred to the need to counteract a “depoliticization of refugee identities through humanitarianism” (p. 318) or a tendency to prioritize the displaced identity above all other salient identities.

### **Literature Review**

Migration and education policies in the US reflect an entrenched history of racialization specific to the US context though not exclusive to it (e.g., Cheran, 2001; Ficarra, 2017; Gans, 2017; Hategekimana, 2023; Whalen, 2006). With regard to migration policy, systems of exclusion based on religion, race, and other essentialized identities have produced politically weighted, temporally distinct processes granting varied forms of legal protection (e.g., Hua, 2010; Lau, 2006). In recent years, Syrian refugees have experienced racialization threatening their sense of security and well-being (Gowayed, 2020), and regionally-specific processes of racialization more broadly impact the resettlement experience of displaced persons across the US (Guerrero, 2016; Kawahara, et al., 2022), holding salience for their everyday lives.

Recent literature exploring the intersections of racialization, xenophobia, coloniality, migration, and education has parsed continued policy-based efforts to exclude learners from pathways to higher education as well as K-12 education. For example, Kuelzer and Houser (2019) point to how “Central and South American immigrants have become targets of oppressive legislation” and offer as example Oklahoma’s 2007 passage of House Bill 1804, which made “knowingly or unknowingly give any sort of aid or assistance to undocumented immigrants” a felony, and which resulted in a drop in Latino enrollment within the Tulsa Public Schools estimated at around 25,000 Latino students (p. 41). Federal efforts persist as well: Jenny J. Lee (2020) has

identified the targeting of Chinese university students in the US by the Department of Homeland Security as a reflection of neo-racism.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Intersectionality is a concept that was created to convey the limits of language, policy, and legal structure in centering marginalized groups in the US setting. Crenshaw (2015) offers the example of Black women being discriminated against in a workplace that hired Black men and White women, thereby giving the appearance of not engaging in racist and sexist practices. Upon closer examination, the company was hiring Black men for specific jobs and White women for others, leading to both discriminatory practices for these groups as well as erasure of Black women. In short, race and gender equity laws often fail to account for people who have more than one marginalized identity and frequently fail to attend to intersecting, salient identities that influence lived experience (e.g., Spade, 2013).

In terms of higher education in the United States, intersectionality presents challenges to both the traditional language and infrastructure of identity-based services. As an outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement, Second Wave Feminism, and other social justice movements, identity-based programs and offices emerged on college campuses. Because this structure largely mirrors movements that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, today's identity-based programs tend to be organized around race, gender, and sexual orientation. Scholars have pointed out the challenges in this structure as students' identities do not always fit neatly into one of these categories (Duran, 2021). To put it another way, how do HEI historicities perpetuate exclusion (Heidegger, 1962), and by extension, how do HEIs employ intersectionality to parse those institutional histories and presents, iterating student services in tandem?

The erasure of student experience is a danger associated with the current identity-based structure adopted by many HEIs. For example, one of the authors worked on a campus in which Muslim students advocated for a center shortly after 9/11 when Islamophobia had reached new heights. Though the discrimination they faced was significant, the university refused to add a new center, arguing that it could not afford to erect a new building, hire staff, and allocate a budget line for an indefinite number of affinity groups. The idea seemed to be that if a group was not grandfathered into the old race/gender/sexual orientation infrastructure, those students would have to find another way to address their needs.

As we approached the current research on displaced students,

we suspected the aforementioned problem might be the case for this group. In our initial inquiry into programs and services for displaced students, we did not come across any language or infrastructure that indicated migrant students' visibility on any campus. We were motivated to examine this erasure in the context of how policies, practices, language, and structures privilege some groups while disenfranchising others, thereby drawing attention to the systems activating that erasure. For us, the following conceptualization is informative: "intersectionality as an analytic and political commitment to challenging the systems, infrastructures, and logics that inflict violence on those deemed 'out of place' by fortified nation-states" (Carastathis et al., 2018, p. 8). Here, the intersectional framework is understood as disrupting power imbalance and simultaneously preempting justification for a lack of attention to structures of oppression by way of constrained resource environments, both national and institutional.

### **Methods and Initial Findings**

This project employs Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) as conceptual framework (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Chase et al., 2014). CPA problematizes a value-neutral linear consideration of policy and instead frames policy as both problem and solution: it considers what is absent as well as what is present, what policy reacts to as well as what it creates (Cheek and Gibson, 1997). To put it another way, CPA considers "discursive practices that create, share, and produce truth claims that can be questioned" (Hernández, 2013, p. 51): the policy-making process itself. This necessitates attention to the strategic decontextualization of entrenched problems, a tactic employed by "state apparatuses structured around the economic market" (Marshall, 1999, p. 63). By extension, CPA considers policy as a practice of power and (re)producer of inequity (Allan et al., 2010) and is therefore a useful tool for the consideration of how existing institutional, state, and HEI policy frameworks around displacement are both structured and understood by those faculty and staff who interpret and enact them.

### **Participants**

The HEIs included in this study are: Ohio's 14 public universities and 23 community colleges, as well as the 51 accredited, private institutions that are members of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Ohio. We selected this pool to broadly sample faculty and staff perceptions of relevant policy, and to allow for the possibility that the range of resources, locations, and institutional missions

across public and private sectors may influence those structures and perceptions. We reached out to one faculty or staff member at each HEI, recruiting interview participants based on:

- (1) their employment status at one of the 88 sampled HEIs.
- (2) participation in a program of displaced student outreach/admission/support.
- (3) availability for a Zoom interview between February to April 2022.

Prospective interview participants were identified based on college or university website listing of their affiliation with (in order of preference): displaced students, immigrant students, new students, or general student services. We also contacted participants through referral by colleagues. Eight interviews were conducted in total.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection used a two-tiered approach to support a nuanced understanding of the policy framing faculty and staff understandings of displaced student support. As a **first stage**, we collected relevant HEI website data on existing supports for displaced learners. Research team members used searches of the 88 HEI homepages to gather relevant data using search terms refugees, asylee, asylum, temporary protected status (TPS), immigrant, and displaced. In the **second stage**, team members interviewed faculty and staff via Zoom in approximately 30 to 45-minute conversations and using a semi-structured interview protocol.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze state higher education policy, institutional policy, and faculty and staff perceptions of displaced student support and their work as policy actors, we drew from CPA and used a combination of inductive and deductive coding (based on key pillars of state-based education policy around displaced learners) to code interview transcripts. Relevant deductive codes included: incidental/accidental services for displaced learners; connection to non-profit/civil society groups; English language instruction (or ELL); tuition; funding streams; lack of awareness of best practice in the field; and lack of data on displaced learners. Each interview transcript was coded independently by two members of the research team. Through a series of memos and collaborative coding practice, we finalized a codebook and identified themes emerging from interview transcripts. This data was analyzed in conjunction with the findings of CPA applied to state and HEI policies



related to displaced learners. In a final step, we considered our findings in light of the extant domestic and international literature on the education of displaced learners to situate the range of policy and programmatic initiatives.

## Findings

### ***Data and Service Gaps Are Persistent But Not Universal***

As noted our data collection process involved reviewing websites of public and private HEIs in Ohio to identify web-based information regarding services for displaced students. While we found webpages nested within university websites that used the terms refugee, asylee, TPS-holder, or displaced—for example the international students' section of the Ohio State University undergraduate admission site (2022)—we did not find any stand-alone webpages outlining services for displaced learners. In stage one, then, our findings indicated that a prospective college student seeking to access tailored information about services for displaced learners like themselves would not find a relevant website at an Ohio-based college or university. This lack of publicly available information around institutional policy and practice reflects a policy silence.

When, in stage two of our data collection process, we interviewed faculty and staff at eight public and private institutions, we garnered more and contradictory detail. Half of the HEI faculty and staff reported that there were no displaced students enrolled at their institutions, while several others referred to a steady “handful” of displaced students having been enrolled over time. We noted that several interview participants answered this question about data on enrollment trends by responding with information about international student enrollment, following that data by stating that few if any displaced students had been enrolled at the HEI in question. This leads us to believe that HEI stakeholders may be associating experiences of displacement exclusively with international students rather than with students holding a variety of legal statuses, but (potentially) resident in the US for a long period of time. For example, one staff member in an admissions unit stated

We've had some students coming from all over the world from different places that maybe have added some challenges to their experiences in the past, but given that it's a small number to begin with there, as far as I know, we don't have necessarily specific programs or specific support that we have for these students.

Several community and regional teaching college staff whose campuses were in rural areas referred to their geographic location as a reason why displaced students were not enrolled at their institutions. One of these staffers went into some detail about how the location of the campus was perceived as inconvenient by many international students in the sense that public transportation was not readily available. Here again, there seems to be a disjunction between a more broad and inclusive definition of displacement—engaging those learners resident in the US prior to study—and a narrower definition of displacement as learners arriving from other national contexts and immediately pursuing higher education.

The majority of interview participants in our study did not identify campus support services centering displaced students. Moreover, the majority of participants either stated or implied that there was no need for such services given low enrollment of displaced learners, though they could not always identify how many learners were or had been enrolled at the institution. Using the Critical Policy Analysis lens, we understand this perceived low demand for service as problematic given the concentration of displaced learners in Ohio and lack of cohesive data on displaced learners at the HEI level, which we argue inhibit the formation of institutional policy. What persists in the stead of reliable, real-time information is a data vacuum and policy silence (Unangst et al, 2022).

In contrast to those faculty and staff reporting low enrollment and low service, we learned from one interview participant that their HEI had developed a new not-for-credit ELL program to serve displaced learners in the Columbus area. The idea in this case had been to potentially scaffold students into higher levels of ELL and perhaps degree programs; that HEI representative noted that they were aware of a similar program being run by a not-for-profit in the city that had such high demand it was regularly turning students away. Thus the Columbus-area example provides an alternative perspective in that the HEI was aware of significant demand for education among displaced people and had considered tiered support structures for part-time learners resident in the US for some time. Within the Ohio landscape, then, persistent data and service gaps around displaced learners are in evidence but are not reflected at all institutions studied here.

### ***Funding of Programs a Central Issue ... with a Range of Possible Solutions***

The question of funding was clearly top-of-mind for all interview participants: this related to the funding of financial aid/scholarships, to stand-alone programs serving displaced learners, and to general stu-

dent support activities. Given continued public disinvestment in higher education across the neoliberal US (e.g. Bullough, R.V., 2014), it is not surprising that funding emerged as a theme in our interviews. As Kliewer (2013) has written, “neoliberal ideology has changed the relationship between the market, civil society and the state” (p. 72). Thus, the HEI-based policy actors in focus here engage with both the uneven power structures of a market-oriented economy and a state-specific education system to achieve their distinct missions in distinct regional frameworks.

When asked which federal or state policies played an important role at the HEI and in the support of displaced students, we received a variety of answers. One respondent from a religiously affiliated institution grouped policies together under the heading of financial aid in identifying this category as the most important; they stated that “financial aid is primarily offered to residents or citizens of the United States... for some displaced populations that might be a significant, almost insurmountable hurdle just... in terms of gaining access.” Other interview participants identified particular financial aid programs (Pell came up several times) as vitally important, while still others identified programs related to legal status (specifically, students having access to green cards, DACA, and OPT). Another discussed the established IREX program at their institution, this being a yearlong Community Engagement Exchange Program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. A community college Designated School Official (DSO) pointed to the performance-based funding model in Ohio – which privileges student completion – as failing to incentivize community colleges to recruit international students “because their main goal is to transfer and so we hardly have any international students complete here.” Broadly, though, what we heard was that federal policies were of central importance across student recruitment and report functions and that Ohio-specific policies played little if any role. We noted that the federal programs mentioned were not aimed at displaced students specifically but might have overlapped with some displaced students in some circumstances.

In several conversations interview participants discussed what funding streams drove financial aid as relevant to displaced students. One administrator identified external funding streams as centrally important to their institution’s international student enrollment, reporting that “seven years ago [over 90% of international students] were from Saudi Arabia because of the oil scholarships.” Another participant who worked in admissions and financial aid at a comparatively well-resourced college discussed the implications of the institution

meeting full need for admitted students; they reported that between five to ten percent of international student applicants needed financial support, and also that there wasn't a specific admissions or financial aid program in place for that population. When asked whether conversations were taking place on campus around developing resources to support displaced learners, the response was no, but our respondent continued:

you know, we would really be looking ...if we wanted to, for many of these students at \$70,000, \$80,000 [for a full scholarship]. You know, to be able to endow those funds over four years, [we would be] looking for multimillion-dollar endowment funds for that to really make a difference other than just kind of naming a scholarship... That wouldn't change our decision. They would really have to be almost fully funded for us to do that.

Here, we see both indication for the potential of donors to have an immediate impact on the higher education access of displaced learners, and also an indication of (perceived) institutional and state-level resistance to reallocating funds in support of new access initiatives. This contrasts with the willingness of institutions and policy actors to support the access of other equity groups through discounted or free tuition, among other initiatives (see for example the Ohio Reach Scholarship program (2023) serving youth formerly in the foster system). Further, we point to our earlier example of the new not-for-credit ELL program to serve displaced learners in the Columbus area: that program was funded by a single benefactor who himself identified as displaced. Clearly, then, various funding models for the expansion of policy exist and must be explored further.

***The Terminology of Policy Liminality:  
Displaced vs. Dislocated, National vs. International***

When we say that displaced learners accessing or enrolled in US higher education experience policy liminality, we mean that they are positioned between discourses rather than being centered within a cohesive suite of federal, state, and institutional-level policy initiatives. Policy liminality has implications for the experiences of displaced learners—policy liminality in the cross-disciplinary literature has been found to impact “feelings of belonging and connection to services and society” in more economically developed countries (Pangas et al., 2019, p. 31)—and, given that our primary focus in this piece is on policy construction, indeed it holds implications for policy iteration.

Our review of HEI websites and conversations with policy actors

revealed that there is no codified language being used by stakeholders around displacement and those learners who identify histories of displacement. In short, while standardized language for other equity groups exists and some Ohio HEI websites use terms including asylee and refugee to reflect specific legal statuses, webpages were not consistent in whether or how they referred to those groups and did not address the umbrella concept of displacement (reflecting many legal statuses and emphasizing individual experience). Further reflecting this policy erasure, our interviews almost always involved participants asking us how we defined “displaced,” and in some cases, interview participants offered alternative or competing definitions. In one case, we spoke at length with an administrator of programs for displaced workers who had lost jobs due to circumstances beyond their control, with these workers being supported in postsecondary education by various federal programs including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Another staff member understood displaced students as referring to those experiencing homelessness, having recently left a sober living or domestic violence facility, or having recently been incarcerated.

In sum, we see enormous opportunity for an education and outreach campaign across higher education and policy training programs as well as professional development programs to codify an understanding of displaced learners as a distinct equity group with a range of competencies, lived experiences, preferences, and needs. In our view, professional associations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) are well positioned to lead that conversation and attendant training opportunities. If higher education policymakers, faculty, staff, and other constituents are not united in their understanding of this population as distinct, it will continue to experience erasure from the policy and student support realms. If displaced students are not named, they will not be supported. If they are not established as part of the equity context then student equity policy, research, and services will continue to be decontextualized.

### ***Establishing Support Networks Facilitating Displaced Student Services ... or Not?***

Our conversations with HEI policy actors frequently related something like: “our institution doesn’t have separate programs for displaced students but we hear about them through our student support network.” Frequently, interview participants would then mention robust, well-articulated formal and informal referral systems through

which faculty, staff, or other community members could designate a student as needing assistance. Assistance here was quite broad and included class-specific tutoring, food bank access, and other opportunities.

We do not imagine that every HEI would be able to sustain a center supporting displaced learners. In fact, we imagine that most HEIs in Ohio and beyond will indeed be most likely to tailor established equity centers, international centers, and student support networks to the needs of displaced learners and/or to engage with broader HEI networks to offer customized support (see Lowenhaupt & Scanlon, 2020). However, as argued elsewhere, it is vital that HEIs are intentional in how they

respond to explicit requests of refugee populations, [and] that they actively incorporate a transparent feedback loop as indicated by intersectional programs in other fields. In addition...an orientation toward sustainable program growth seems commensurate with an intersectional, social justice approach to refugee student support. (Unangst & Crea, 2020, p. 239)

Essentially, HEIs and state and national policy actors are called to provide resources (financial, human resources, or otherwise), leadership that reflects the range of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of the population served and/or regularly informs their strategic, operational, and programming goals through learning alongside these minoritized communities. As they develop and iterate that policy, they must select “credible partners” and establish initiatives that offer equitable access (Thurston, 2016, p.101–2). Finally, it is vital to situate displaced learners as co-constructing these policies and attendant programs. We gesture here towards work on participatory policy making in the context of the neoliberal, highly differentiated US system in particular (Baccaro and Papadakis, 2008), understood as involving students as stakeholder group. As Dal Zotto and Fusari (2021) have put it in discussion of the University of Pavia, “the university enters the co-design process in a dual role. First, it is the institutional actor of the academic community. Second, at the national and international levels, it plays a decisive role in designing reception and inclusion policies” (p. 233).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The US landscape of migration and education policy is located at the nexus of systemic oppression and decades of public sector disinvestment, which have directly affected student access and experience. All HEIs, then, engage with racist and exclusionary institutional histo-

ries nested within racist and exclusionary federal and state policy. Our work considers how Ohio policies posit higher education as a public good for displaced learners, thereby advancing higher education access and success among students with a range of intersectional identities. We draw attention to the paucity of relevant policies across the state landscape but also to standout institutions and potentials: the development of a not-for-credit ELL program aimed at adult learners that envisioned the potential of transfer to credit-bearing programs; the impact of a single donor wanting to support displaced students; the interest of a HBCU in potentially recruiting students with histories of displacement from Africa.

Though it was not identified as an *in vivo* code across interview transcripts, we heard clearly through our conversations that service was a key value and skill at the heart of the work HEI-based policy actors engaged in. They spoke at length about work they did that extended beyond what they and/or coworkers considered “required” and frequently reflected on time-sensitive referrals from colleagues to support students who identified as international, ELL, or displaced (though this latter category was the small minority of cases). Our interview participants understood this as service to the HEI community, an understanding which is consistent with how US higher education professional organizations and training programs frame service. We also gleaned from several interviews that the faculty/staff in question referred students to local not-for-profit organizations for additional service. In short, the interview participants we engaged with actively contested policy limits through their own (sustained, often remarkable) service and their referral of learners to non-HEI, non-governmental service provided by community-based actors. HEI staff service, then, may dampen the effect of policy liminality for some learners at some HEIs.

For us, this circumstance begged the question: though individual policy actors located at Ohio HEIs routinely engage in service to displaced students (among others), what could we make of the service institutional and state policies offered by extension? Indeed, we considered whether the policies entities themselves, both institutional and state, promote examples of “service” in the stead of policy centering displaced learners. In other words, our findings seem to indicate further research on the topic of how institutional and state policies presume “service” across migration and education spheres and therefore frame the labor and resources of individual higher education staffers as well as college community stakeholders as permanent, necessary, and divesting the HEI or state from further investment.

In short, we find clear evidence of a policy vacuum, a data gap, a training disparity, and because of the profound lack of supportive policy it is difficult to identify any policies or programs as reflecting an intersectional approach in this area. Displaced learners are indeed at the fringe of several policy realms: equity policy (in the US context generally understood to involve “domestic” students), international education policy (generally understood to involve students traveling to the US for a credit-based program or one preparing students for a credit-based program), and outward-referrals to come-one-come-all community (sometimes religious) relief programs.

Broadly, we understand this state of play as dissonant with higher education as public good. If higher education is for all, we would assume that at a minimum admissions policies for displaced students would be evident. Formalized pathways—evidenced by tailored outreach and/or admissions and financial aid programs—are not in operation. This lack of support for displaced learners indicates a clear systemic failure, and one which cannot be separated from an entrenched history of racialization and exclusion experienced by migrant learners in the US setting.

Working from an understanding of education as social contract and as a human right, we point to language and infrastructure as key considerations for Ohio-based policy actors moving forward. By infrastructure we refer to funding, participatory strategies, accessible information for a specific equity group, and so forth. By language we refer to the need for a glossary, a nomenclature to refer to the diverse grouping of displaced learners accessing and pursuing higher education in the US; we refer to a consideration of essentialism and power imbalance across all university functions; consistent attention to and naming of public disinvestment in education; and linguistic competencies. The research discussed here extends an understanding of the current and ever-expanding landscape of displaced learners’ access to higher education. It considers student mobility within Ohio in, perhaps, a new way. Most importantly, it calls for change.

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