Chapter 2

Critical Incidents and Exercises
What Would You Do If....?

Now that you have learned a bit about what you need to know to properly counsel and instruct skilled immigrants hoping to make use of their foreign credentials, let’s practice a bit with some real cases.

In this chapter, we provide several case studies of immigrant professionals to see how adept you are at helping them. Readers should draw upon their existing knowledge to formulate a plan to help each of the students navigate a successful career pathway. We recommend that you do these exercises with a group of your colleagues or with members of your adult education program staff. At the end of each vignette, you will find a few hints and explanations of how to best deal with each person in order to gain the most effective results. The more you learn about the needs of this special population, the better you will become at helping them find solutions to their particular situations.

At the end of this chapter, we also present a brief exercise in creating an effective intake form for your program, as well as a number of other discussion questions.

Critical Incident # 1: The Engineer from Iraq

Mahmoud Zahid is a 35-year-old married civil engineer originally from Baghdad. He is a 1998 engineering graduate of the University of Baghdad and has worked as a licensed professional engineer for ten years in Iraq. During his career, he was a project manager on several large infrastructure projects in the capital as well. He was resettled as a refugee in the U.S. in 2010 without his wife and two children. Mahmoud came with the expectation that he would be able to quickly get a well-paying engineering job since he was told there was a shortage of good engineers in the U.S. So far, he has had no luck in finding work in his profession.

He is currently living in Irvine, California, and is attending a three-hour/week ESL grammar class at Saddleback Community College. He is also taking a calculus class just for fun. He is proud of his math ability. He is amazed at how much more he knows than the American students in the class. He works at a minimum-wage job as a night cashier at a 7-Eleven in Santa Ana and also, occasionally, as a pizza delivery man for Domino's. He has been told by his 22-year old boss at 7-Eleven that he needs a GED to get a full,
daytime position with the company. His cousin told him that he can just send a copy of
his diploma to the engineering board to become a professional engineer. But he has had
no luck finding organizations who will accept a copy of his diploma. He is very frustrated
and believes that the reason he can't get work is because of post-9/11 anti-Muslim
prejudice on the part of local employers. His ability to read textbook English on
engineering subjects is very good but his oral communication skills are relatively poor.
Due to his very strong accent, people have trouble understanding him. He speaks Arabic
and French fluently and believes this should count for something. He thinks getting his
professional engineering license will help him get an engineering job. He has been living
off of his savings but that is quickly running out.

Questions

1) How would you begin to help Mahmoud in his career search? Help him sort out
what his priorities should be by first listing all the things that you think he is doing
“wrong” in his job search.

2) Go to Upwardly Global’s Licensed Professions Guides at
www.upwardlyglobal.org/job-seekers/american-licensed-professions. How long
do you estimate that it will take Mahmoud to earn his professional engineering
(P.E.) license in California? What would it cost? Does he need to take an exam?
What kind? Do all engineers need a P.E. in California?

3) Mahmoud is eager to start his professional career in the U.S. What advice would you
give him about alternative careers to engineering given his current skill set?

4) What would you tell Mahmoud about the GED? Do you think he knows what the
GED is? What do you think about Mahmoud taking grammar and calculus
classes at Saddleback?

5) What advice would you give Mahmoud on how to develop his professional
portfolio while he looks for opportunities?

6) How would you help Mahmoud put into perspective his growing belief that his
difficulties are because of post 9/11 anti-Muslim prejudice? How would you help
him manage his expectations?
Suggested Course of Action for the Engineer from Iraq

Mahmoud’s is a classic case of what happens to many highly-skilled, well-educated immigrants when they come to the U.S. His expectations before migration were, unfortunately, based on dreams, not facts. You need to help him get his facts straight in order for him to create an effective path to workplace success. Mahmoud must understand and accept the fact that without mastering oral communication skills in English – what we call Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) – he is not going to go very far in any professional setting. A grammar class – or what we like to call Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) – is not what he needs right now.¹ He also doesn’t need to study calculus “just for fun”, unless he can start a business tutoring the less-skilled students in the class. This is just avoiding the obvious issues at hand. The fact that he speaks Arabic and French is nice, but, unfortunately, in the U.S., it really doesn’t count for much in gaining a well-paying engineering job in Southern California.

In sum, Mahmoud has his priorities all skewed. Help him sort them out. Begin by getting him into a communicative ESL class and start dealing with the professional engineering licensing issue. Make sure he knows how long this will take, how much it will cost and, most importantly, that he actually doesn’t need to have a P.E. license to work in most engineering jobs, including project management jobs. He most certainly does not need a GED diploma. He really should not be taking advice from a 22-year-old night manager, even if he is his boss for the moment. He should be seeking out advice from other civil engineering professionals by becoming involved in the CE professional societies and networks in the area. Perhaps he could take an engineering course at UCI Extension to meet some of these professionals (and brush up on or learn some new skills at the same time). He may even want to think about graduate school in engineering to better position himself for the local job market. He should also attempt to get a credential evaluation; he or a family member or trusted friend back home can contact the University of Baghdad to send his official transcripts to a reliable credential evaluation service. Finally, he needs to truly understand that his job problems stem more from his inability to communicate and be understood than any lingering post 9/11 prejudice.

¹ BICS and CALP will be discussed in greater detail in Ch.3: Adult ESL Classroom Strategies.
Critical Incident # 2: The Accountant from Guinea

Mamadou Barry is a 27-year-old accountant from Guinea. He is a graduate of the Gamal Abdel Nasser University of Conakry and has three years of work experience in banking in Guinea. He immigrated to the U.S. last year to reunite with his family members who have been living in Colorado. He is currently living outside of Denver and is unemployed. He is eager to become a certified public accountant (CPA). He has been told by an uncle that this is what he should do and that it is easier to do this in Colorado than elsewhere in the U.S., but he has no idea how to start this process.

Questions

1) How would you begin to counsel Mamadou? What do you need to know about his education, work experience and English ability that you don't yet know from the description given above?

2) According to the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) at www.nasba.org/, what does Mamadou need to do to become a CPA in the U.S.? Is it easier to become a CPA in Colorado?

3) What are some alternative careers for accountants in the U.S.?

4) What level of English does Mamadou need to work as an accountant? To pass the Exam?

5) What advice would you give Mamadou on how to develop his professional portfolio while he looks for opportunities?

Suggested Course of Action for the Accountant from Guinea

Mamadou is actually in a better situation than he might think he is. His uncle isn’t completely incorrect when he says that living in Colorado is good for him. Colorado is one of the few states where work experience in the U.S. is not required to sit for the CPA exam. You need to find out a few things in order to properly help Mamadou. What is his proficiency level in English? This is critical. Has he taken a standardized, academic English proficiency test such as TOEFL, TOEIC or IELTS? If not, he should think of sitting for one of these exams. He may know accounting, but the CPA exam is in English. He would also be well advised to seek out opportunities to learn more about U.S. accounting standards and practices, whether through
further education or hands-on experience. Direct him to NASBA’s resources so that he is working with the facts. Also, make sure he knows there are many viable work alternatives that do not require CPA licensing. Accountants without a CPA license can work privately analyzing budgets and costs. They can also work as bookkeepers, in banking and in other finance areas involving accounting. He should explore these areas, as well as what skills he might need to acquire to improve his job prospects (such as learning to work with popular bookkeeping or accounting software programs). Make sure he starts to work on his resume and interviewing skills as well.
Critical Incident # 3: The Physician from Cuba

Dr. Jose Luis Llorente Barrueco is a 44-year-old physician from Cuba with a specialty in hematology and oncology. He has been living in Brooklyn, NY, since 2009 and currently works as a “waste disposal” janitor at Maimonides Medical Center in Borough Park. Though he knows this job is menial, given his qualifications, he is just happy to be back in a hospital setting. It beats his previous jobs as a security guard, a busboy, and a shoe salesman. He had been taught Russian in his military school in Cuba and knew no English when he arrived in the U.S. He knows his English is not what it should be, but feels that since there are so many Spanish speakers in NYC, this shouldn't be a problem in getting a job in medicine. He feels he is needed but that he doesn't get any respect. He has tried to attend ESL classes at his church but can't seem to find the motivation and energy to continue them. Though the teacher is very kind, the other students are not as educated as he is. He feels that the class is beneath him and is afraid that the other students and, maybe even the teacher, think he is arrogant. He isn’t. He is just frustrated and depressed. He has been told that he needs to pass four exams given only in English, and then put in several years of training as a hospital resident to practice in the U.S. He feels he is too old to dedicate years to studying for exams and finding and completing a residency program. Others have told him to think about becoming a nurse, a job that would at least allow him to work with patients. He has a hard time thinking this is a solution. Deep down he is a doctor. He is almost at the point of feeling that he should never have left Cuba.

Questions

1) Where would you begin in helping Dr. Llorente get on a pathway to a more successful career? What should his priorities be?
2) What advice would you give him about alternative careers given his current skill set?
3) What kind of English program should he, ideally, be enrolled in? Is there one in his area?

Suggested Course of Action the Physician from Cuba

First, Dr. Llorente needs to enroll in a Contextualized Medical English program. He needs to explore other medical careers beside that of physician. Third Dr. Llorente should start
networking with other medical professionals of all types. Where can he do all three of the above? Well, he’s in luck living in New York City. He should be directed to the Welcome Back Center (www.laguardia.edu/nycwbc/) for foreign educated healthcare professions based in La Guardia Community College in Queens, New York. Like its sister programs around the country\(^2\), this program helps immigrant healthcare professionals get back into medical careers. If Dr. Llorente lived outside of the New York area, he might want to visit a local community college to explore career options in allied health, such as cardiovascular technology, respiratory therapy, or surgical technician. He might be eligible for advanced standing in some of these programs given his training as a physician. He might also consider master’s level programs in public health or health administration, or think about alternative occupations in medical research or community health.

Critical Incident # 4: The Diplomat’s Daughter From Venezuela

Adriana Garcia is the daughter of a diplomat from Venezuela. Her family fled Caracas in 2003 after her father fell out of favor with President Chavez’s administration. At the time, Adriana had just completed her first year of university studies at The Central University of Venezuela in Caracas, studying English Literature. Adriana and her family immigrated to New Jersey when Adriana was 22. For several years now, Adriana has been trying to complete her university education. She has also picked up some part-time work doing translations and teaching ESL at a local community center in Union City, NJ. She is fluent in Spanish and French and scored a 610 on an unofficial institutional paper-based TOEFL that she took at the International Institute of New Jersey in Jersey City. She also sat for and passed the GED on the advice of a counselor at Hudson County Community College in Jersey City and has taken some composition classes at Union County College in Cranford, NJ. She really wants to become a professional, certified high school English teacher or an ESL teacher to adults.

Questions

1) How would you help Adriana? What are some options and alternatives for her given her background? Did she need a GED?

2) Can she use the education she received at Central University of Venezuela? Does she qualify for transfer credits? How can she find out the answers to these questions?

3) What does Adriana need to do to prepare a good career portfolio? What would you suggest she do to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher in the U.S.? Is this a real possibility for her? What does she need to do to accomplish this goal? How long will it take?

Suggested Course of Action for the Diplomat’s Daughter from Venezuela

This is someone we would love to have as an English teacher at either the adult or secondary level. She has skills and talents that shouldn’t go to waste. Though she has been given some inappropriate advice in the past, it hasn’t set her back all that much. Her English is already good - she has jumped the biggest hurdle. If she can obtain her official transcripts from Caracas, she is one more step ahead of the game. She should be advised on how the U.S. system of higher education works. More specifically, she should be helped to understand the
educational and certification requirements for secondary teachers in NJ and how they may differ from adult ESL teacher requirements. A trip or a phone call to a workforce development program specializing in the issues of highly skilled immigrants, like Upwardly Global, would certainly be worthwhile.
The Importance of Really Knowing Who Our Students Are

Quite a bit of attention has been paid in recent years to the importance of having a comprehensive, systematic and organized intake process in community adult education programs to assure that student and program goals are being met. Adult education programs should have intake procedures that prepare students to enter an appropriate level of instruction and persist long enough to make measurable progress. During the intake process, programs should gather all pertinent information from students about their skills, past education, needs, and goals, while students should gather information about the kinds of services offered by the program and the kinds of services they will need to achieve their goals. Intake procedures should also provide students with a realistic assessment of the time and effort required to achieve their personal goals. This is especially important when working with highly-skilled immigrants.

Discussion Exercise #1: Creating a Useful Intake Tool

Complete the following discussion exercises with your ESL colleagues or your program staff.

Instructions: After working through the critical incident exercises at the beginning of this chapter and from your own experience on the job, you should understand the value and importance of knowing where your clients are coming from. The more background information you can gather about the immigrants you are assisting, the better able you will be to meet their language, educational and employment needs. With this in mind, work on the following exercise thoughtfully, discussing the questions below with your colleagues.

Imagine that you are starting a new position as an ESL Instructor in a multi-service agency that provides ESL instruction, job-readiness and job placement. Your agency serves immigrants and refugees from all educational backgrounds. The agency assists new arrivals as well as more established clients with extensive work history in the United States. Your first task as the new ESL instructor is to design an intake form for new students. Given the variety of students with very diverse backgrounds in this program, what needs to be included? Given your interest and what you know about counseling highly skilled immigrant students, what do you think should be

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a part of this intake form? What would you want to know about your students before you meet them in class?

**Discussion Exercise #2: Things to Think About**

*With your ESL colleagues or program staff, discuss the following:*

1) Do you feel that highly educated immigrants are more likely to be unemployed than their American counterparts? Why or why not?

2) Do you believe that highly educated immigrants get less sympathy (empathy) and therefore less help from American social services and even ESL teachers than low skilled immigrants? Why or why not?

3) What makes highly skilled immigrants hesitate to ask for help?

4) How important is English proficiency in creating a successful career pathway for a skilled immigrant? If important, why is this hard to achieve for some?

5) What is the purpose of the GED diploma in the American education context? Why are so many skilled immigrants with high school diplomas and college educations from their home countries advised to sit for the GED tests? Does this make sense? Explain.

6) Do you think interview coaching is a **must** for highly educated immigrants in the professional job search? Why or why not? What do you see as some areas that may be difficult for new immigrants in a job interview?

7) Does it make sense to take time to help a skilled immigrant build a better resume? Why or why not?

8) Choose two or three professions that usually require licensing in the U.S. and explore how you might advise students to pursue alternatives to licensure.

9) At a minimum, what do skilled immigrant students with educational backgrounds from their home countries need to know about the American education system to effectively plan their career paths? How does the U.S. system differ significantly from most education systems in other parts of the world?