

Escape to the

Abdulai Bah, a political asylee from Liberia, now attends the College of Staten Island.

Ivory Tower

When political asylees and refugees apply for admission to U.S. colleges and universities, they are often incorrectly treated as foreign students. But a whole different set of rules apply that international educators need to know. **BY DAVID TOBENKIN**

As child, Abdulai Bah attended Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone—in a sense. He and his friends would walk around the well-tended and isolated campus, interview students actually attending the school, and pretend they too were attending. “My dream had always been to go to college,” Bah says. “We’d go there and envy the students. It was just a way of us trying to show we could reach a dream that we probably wouldn’t be able to reach, because in Sierra Leone you must pay for your education yourself and there was probably no way we would be able to do this.”

Challenges beyond economics were soon to make his dream of a higher education even more difficult. Bah’s gentle face belies a very difficult 24 years on the planet. Born in Sierra Leone, he was nine years old when the war from Liberia spilled into that country. His mother and brother were soon killed in the war. At age 14, he was forced to flee to join relatives in the neighboring country of Guinea. But then, after a few years, the Guinean government began accusing the Leonese refugees of subversion and in 2000 began repatriating them to Sierra Leone, where they faced persecution or death at the hands of the government. With the help of friends, Bah managed to escape and travel illegally by truck to Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, and then Senegal. Despite the moves, Bah was one of the fortunate ones; in addition to surviving, he was able to get formal elementary and secondary education through United Nations classes and local public schools in Guinea.

Later that year, a friend helped Bah obtain documentation to come to the United States. There was just one problem: the documents were false and Bah was arrested when he arrived in the United States. Fortunately, Immigration and Naturalization Service interviewers asked what would happen if he was deported to his home country. Bah explained that he faced possible death because

of the ongoing war. He was allowed to apply for political asylum. Bah spent a grim four months in a detention center in New Jersey until, assisted by attorneys and volunteers at the American Friends Service Committee, he was granted asylum status.

One goal remained: a college education.

He applied to New York’s College of Staten Island to pursue undergraduate education. On its face, admission should not have been difficult. Bah had been granted asylum status and was one of the fortunate ones who had a diploma and could prove that he had graduated from high school. But it was not so simple, says Bah:

“The College of Staten Island asked me to provide proof of my status and asked if I was a U.S. citizen. I said ‘no.’ Then they asked if I was a green card holder. I said, ‘technically no but I have the same advantages as a green card holder.’ They said, ‘what do you mean?’ I said, ‘I’m an asylee and have the same rights.’ I showed my I-94 [a federal form documenting asylum status] and a letter given to me by the judge. On that document it says ‘asylum granted.’ Then I had to get a letter from my lawyer provided to me by American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) explaining my status, my age, and why I was not living with family. They then took all the documents together and verified my status.”

Bah, after clarifying his status, was eventually accepted and is now a sophomore majoring in international studies and minoring in journalism. However, he found that he had more explaining to do when he applied for financial aid there.

“I was again asked to prove my status. They asked, ‘Are you a citizen or are you a permanent resident?’” Bah says. “To their understanding, if I was not a citizen, I must be a permanent resident to be eligible for financial aid. I had to provide financial documentation and write a letter explaining my story. Luckily, I was accepted for financial aid, though it didn’t cover all my costs.”

Htar Htar Hu, a Burmese asylum applicant, attends Middlebury College.

A Battle Against the Odds

Like Bah, most refugees and asylees overcome tremendous odds just to reach the United States. The few who are successful in arriving here not infrequently face challenges similar to Bah's in gaining access to higher education. Many educators and administrators are unaware that holders of refugee and asylee status are entitled to many of the same rights as permanent residents for purposes of gaining admission and obtaining financial aid for undergraduate and graduate programs. In addition, the refugees and asylees frequently must contend with a lack of proper documentation required for admission or financial aid besides refugee and asylee papers, the shock of functioning in a foreign and competitive culture and environment, lack of a support system, psychological trauma, and concern regarding loved ones in other countries who are often still in harm's way.

While by all accounts many educators and administrators make substantial efforts to accommodate such students' special needs and, in some cases, truly heroic efforts, their efforts also sometimes fall short.

"If you win asylum status, you have the right to go to college," says Stephen W. Yale-Loehr, who teaches immigration law at Cornell Law School. "However, there might be problems documenting it or in the ability to qualify for a scholarship. Most of these problems arise because of a lack of knowledge about asylees and refugees. If properly explained, there should not be problems with admission."

"Most university admissions program people are not well versed in refugee status and aren't familiar with the documents these students come with," says Marilyn Rymniak, executive director of adult education services at International Institute of New Jersey, a Jersey City, N.J.-based private, nonprofit educational institution serving many refugees and asylees students, and a former executive director of the TOEFL Program at Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. "As a result, the advising, in particular, is often inappropriate. Refugees and asylees frequently aren't advised to pursue the level of education of which they are capable and aren't even aware they are being misdirected. They are told to get a GED [General Educational Development] test. Many times they don't need a GED; they already have a diploma from their own country. Or they are sent through a community college track and end up taking twice the time to achieve their educational objectives because they are advised to take classes they don't need."

Ruth Spivack, outreach coordinator for the Washington, D.C.-based Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project of the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, says that an-



other student from Cameroon granted asylum recently faced a similar problem at a Washington, D.C.-area community college. "What he told me is that he had to enroll as a foreign student, which means they don't understand that he is an asylee. They have him as a foreign student, which is a different classification with lesser rights."

A representative of the College of Staten Island (CSI) says the fact that Bah was ultimately admitted and offered financial aid showed the college's application processing system worked.

"CSI is delighted to have Mr. Bah as a student," says Robert Huber, director of communications and marketing at the college. "The process that enabled his enrollment at CSI with financial aid is meant to be serious but not onerous, and I think that's exactly what transpired in Mr. Bah's case. He applied. He met our standards. We verified his status. The system works and Mr. Bah and CSI are the better for it."

A "Well-founded" Fear of Persecution

Some confusion over the rights of refugees and asylees is not surprising given their small numbers. Asylees and refugees are individuals granted special status if they can show they have a "well founded" fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Refugees are generally processed outside the United States and are interviewed by U.S. embassies abroad. Some 54,000 were admitted in 2005, according to the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics.

By contrast, asylees apply for and receive such status in the United States, which awarded asylum status to some 25,000 persons in 2005. Applications for asylum are processed by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services division of the DHS and immigration judges. The odds are stiff: In recent years, only about 30 percent of applicants for asylum status adjudicated by USCIS each year have been approved for asylum status, according to the Office of Immigration Statistics. Recipients of that status receive an Arrival-Departure Record (I-94) card from the USCIS showing the designation of “asylee.” To complete the next step in the process, one year after they receive asylum status, they can apply for lawful permanent residence (e.g., a green card) and, after five years as a lawful permanent resident, they can apply for citizenship.

Asylees and refugees are allowed to stay in the United States and be treated as permanent residents, Yale-Loehr says. That status is not accorded to holders of student visas, who are legally eligible to stay for a set period, or undocumented immigrants, who are subject to deportation. The latter cannot receive federal financial aid and generally are not entitled to in-state tuition and admissions criteria except for a minority of states in which state legislatures have removed such requirements.

Students with pending asylum case applications filed generally receive no special protection from deportation. However, some schools do in fact treat asylum applicants the same as asylees and admit students who can show that they have applied for asylum, says Sherman Helberg, director of admissions and enrollment management at Maryland’s Montgomery College system, located in the greater Washington, D.C. area. Montgomery College, like many community colleges in cities that are primary international destinations, is a major educator of refugees and asylees, with 200 refugees and 125 asylees among its 32,000 students, Helberg says.

Admission and Status Rights

Even students who do receive refugee or asylum status can face documentation challenges. One problem for asylees is that they are sometimes given inconsistent documents, says Patricia Hatch, program manager for the Maryland Office for New Americans. “Asylees have the toughest time because of inconsistency of the documents they are given. Not all asylees are granted status through a regional asylum office. Some are granted that status by judges or the Board of Immigration Appeals. Each of those places gives different documents. A judge, for example, may just give a copy of the decision. That’s hard for a financial aid officer to look at and determine the status of, particularly since they sometimes just get a copy, and it’s the only thing the student has to show they are qualified.”

If they have the right asylee or refugee documents, as Yale-Loehr noted, students receive the right to apply for admission to colleges and universities on a level playing field with state residents. But some students have found that theory and practice are two different matters in this regard, as some institutions have only recently

adjusted their policies to recognize asylee and refugee rights.

Jacques (whose name has been changed because of concerns about retaliation against his family in his home country) is an intense student from a West African nation who arrived to the United States at age 23, attended a State University of New York school for undergraduate studies, and graduated last year. He then took the MCAT test for medical school admission while surviving as a security guard and a taxi cab driver, scored high enough to warrant serious medical school consideration, and in fall 2005 submitted applications to about a dozen medical schools. After not hearing back from any the schools, Eleanor Spiegel, a volunteer with AFSC, called several schools on his behalf and says that “three said that they said they were not interested because he was not a permanent resident or a U.S. citizen.”

An AFSC attorney then called Robert Sabalis, associate vice president for student affairs and programs at the Association of American Medical Colleges, which represents 125 medical schools and 68,000 medical students and provides guidance to member schools on admissions standards, to ask him to intervene on Jacques’ behalf.

Ironically, just prior to the AFSC’s call to Sabalis, Sabalis had sent out an advisory statement to members of the association recommending that member schools treat asylee and refugee medical school applicants similarly to permanent resident applicants for purposes of admissions and financial aid.

“What happened with this student [Jacques] in the fall is that of our medical schools members, four or six were unaware of this change in our guidance to them and were unaware of what asylee status addressed,” Sabalis says. “They rejected student asylee status out of hand because they thought fell into same category as international students. All I did was to remind the schools of our advice to them.”

Medical schools face difficult challenges balancing compassion with obligations to native students and taxpayer expectations, Sabalis says.

“In the past the question of citizenship and visa status has related to whether you were a citizen or a permanent resident of the U.S. If you weren’t, you became an international applicant to U.S. medical schools. That’s an issue for two reasons: first, many of the schools are public, state-supported schools that offer preference to residents of the state. If the student didn’t have a green card, their legal residence was in country of origin since he or she was not a legal resident of the state. Any state-supported medical school is unlikely to look at applications from non-state residents. Second, for any medical school, including public and private ones that accept international applications, there is the question of how to pay. The federal financial aid that most applicants use is not available to non-citizens or non-permanent residents unless they have asylee status.”

Sabalis says that he is unclear how many schools responded to his body’s recommendations and notes that individual schools must make their own decisions. “I’m not sure how many have changed their policies, but I expect most of them will change them,” he says.

Sabalís says that one reason the issue has only recently been addressed by his association is that asylees and refugees represent only a portion of the miniscule contingent of international students, which he says numbers roughly 100 of the 17,000 total medical students who matriculate per year.

Jacques has now been admitted to three medical schools for matriculation in fall, Spiegel says, though she added in June that he was waiting to hear regarding scholarship assistance and had not selected any school.

Special Needs

In addition to admissions issues, refugees and asylees have special needs. Counseling is a critical issue and sage counseling and extra efforts can often make the difference between success and failure for refugees and asylees.

“Often it is hard for refugee and asylee students to get good counseling,” says Bruce Bassoff, a professor of English at the University of Colorado, Boulder, who has helped refugees from Sudan attend state colleges and universities in Colorado. “One refugee student I worked with who is now at Colorado University began at the community college and took quite a few unnecessary credits. Now they are in a special program to prevent them from disappearing into the woodwork and to allow people to keep eye on them.”

“It’s different and more difficult being an immigrant student in general—you have to learn a new language, culture, and academics—but being refugee means facing issues even beyond that,” says Lan Quoc Nguyen, who arrived as a refugee from Vietnam in 1980 as a high school sophomore and proceeded to attend and graduate with an undergraduate degree from the University of California, Riverside, obtain a juris doctorate degree from Hastings College of the Law, and launch a general practice law firm headquartered in Westminster, California. “You escaped the country without preparation. You had no time to plan. And you didn’t plan to work. Most of us came very unprepared to face the educational system, and had to learn English, culture, everything all at once. It’s hard to get caught up. You have to be competitive to succeed and you have to do doubly, if not many times more work, just to stay even.”

Functioning at larger campuses is often a challenge, experts and refugee students say.

“Some classes you take with 500 other students and you’re just one of the people in the crowd,” says Sudanese refugee Simon Garang, who recently graduated from the University of Colorado at Boulder. “The teacher just comes, gives a lecture, goes away and all you have to learn is a book. You have to get skills to stay ahead of the crowd: reading ahead, knowing what to do, when to get help.”

Garang is one of the “Lost Boys,” members of Southern Sudanese



WEB EXTRA!

A related article that takes a closer look at financial aid challenges for political asylee and refugee students can be found on the NAFSA Web site at www.nafsa.org/webextra.

tribes who fled the Sudanese government in 1987. Garang fled through Ethiopia, settled in Kenya, and was eventually granted refugee status and admission to the United States.

Garang, now 28, says that a critical determinant of success for many refugees is, not surprisingly, how much education they received in their countries of origin. “When you come to the U.S. and try to piece together basic educational skills, like math, writing, and communication, it is a huge bridge to cross,” says Garang, who was fortunate enough to attend high school during his years in Kenya and obtain a diploma. “Just understanding the English language is difficult because it is not spoken here as in Africa. So is passing the GED, which is a necessary requirement to get state and federal grant or financial aid. Those hassles

affect people without solid foundation the most, people who only went to elementary school or who have not studied for a while. Many don’t pass the GED, so it’s hard to go to community college and they have to work for tuition. I did, so I have the opportunity to borrow money or get scholarships or work if I have time. Once you have the basic skills it opens the windows of opportunity for you to get scholarships, because many organizations offering scholarships want to know money won’t be wasted on someone who will leave.”

Special Efforts

Many social assistance and denominational groups, such as the American Friends Service Committee, Catholic Charities, and Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights, provide a wide range of invaluable legal, educational, and subsistence services to immigrants.

Some of these agencies are making efforts to assist refugees in seeking college education and bridge the gap Garang described. Chicago-based Heartland recently began an outreach project with local community colleges to help imprint the idea of higher education in the minds of recent refugees and asylees, says Shana Wills, director of refugee and immigrant community services at Heartland.

“We want to get them more comfortable with the idea of higher education so once they get more comfortable and settle their families they will see that as a next step,” says Wills. “Right now we are hosting community workshops at local community colleges where we invite adult instruction instructors to participate and introduce them to education and opportunities at the college.”

Wills says that Heartland also has started to implement a college prep course for the adolescent refugee population who are recent arrivals in the last three years. “They are thrust into secondary education with no prior experience,” she says. “While they are struggling

to learn English and get footed in the academic system, we are introducing the concept of higher education. We are working with local universities and community colleges and discussing educational opportunities, financial aid, and admissions.”

On the other hand, students who already have education, and even advanced degrees, from institutions in foreign countries often find they do not receive credit for them at United States institutions. “I’ve got two international lawyers and one is washing dishes and the other is working at Safeway,” says Jennifer Gueddiche, director of the African Community Center in Denver, Colorado, a resettlement community program for refugees. “They would like to enroll in U.S. law schools. One has been here six months and the other three weeks. The thought of incurring that much debt to get that degree is really off-putting for many people. But these are tenacious people who have survived war and have made it and I don’t think it is a dream they will give up easily.”

For more educated students, private programs like those offered by Rymniak’s International Institute of New Jersey may provide a bridge. “Refugees and asylees can’t afford university programs but need services that are the same as university programs, such as Department of Labor-financed programs like IINJ,” Rymniak says. “We run six-level English language training programs, which also integrate civics content, and we also offer financial literacy programs. We also have a centralized intake system where we profile the person so that we know their ultimate needs, such as whether, for example, they want to start in an engineering program, or are already a practicing engineer who wants to get certified in the United States.”

What both better and more poorly educated refugees and asylees share is the need for as much flexibility and understanding from educators and administrators as they can reasonably provide. “Some asylees have suffered horrible traumas,” Moccio says. “Some educational packages require full-time attendance and if the asylee can’t pursue school full time because he or she needs medical care, it’s important that the student not lose eligibility for grants. We also see asylees trying to take care of family members stranded abroad and sometimes the asylee must go to another country to care for them. Emergencies come up that asylees need to take care of quickly. We hope the system can have compassion and provide the flexibility necessary to help asylees heal and unite with their families.”

Academics should understand the reluctance of some refugees and asylees to share

personal refugee stories, says AFSC volunteer Spiegel. “Jacques, in particular, felt that such inquiries in interviews for medical school dealt not with anything relevant to his academic life but rather his personal story, which he felt was not related to how well he would achieve in school, but rather to educators’ curiosity,” Spiegel says. “Those stories brought back painful memories and could possibly hurt his family back in Africa.”

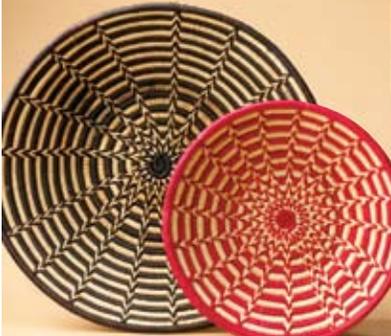
Many schools are making special efforts to serve refugees and asylees.

Community colleges in particular play a vital role in serving refugee and asylee populations. At City University of New York, CUNY school campuses with large immigrant student bases have immigration centers that help applicants with citizenship issues and other issues related to immigration, says Pat Mabry, an admissions counselor at CUNY’s Hosts Community College campus.

Students with refugee or asylum status and documentation can attend CUNY so long as they have a high school diploma from any school in the world or a passing grade on the GED exam, Mabry says. With respect to financial aid, she says that refugees or asylees automatically qualify for financial aid for her college, a two-year school, at the in-state, resident rate. She says that the low tuition of \$1,400 per semester with resident status is also an attraction to new immigrants.

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Dedicated Faculty and Administrator Lend a Hand

At other schools, faculty and administrators sometimes take it upon themselves to minister to refugee and asylee students' special needs. Such was the case with Bassoff, the University of Colorado, Boulder professor who shepherded prospective Sudanese refugee students through his university's admissions and financial aid process. Bassoff's efforts won the students significant concessions, such as the waiving of an application deadline for one student, he says.

"I don't want to claim much for myself," Bassoff says. "All the credit goes to these guys. They had hard work and discipline. I went on their behalf to the admissions office, the financial aid office, and I used whatever clout I could to get them a good package. I also took them to offices of academic studies to help them get into courses and helped them with counseling."

"My wife and I became involved five years ago, after we heard that these Sudanese refugees had arrived and had nothing. We packed up a car and brought stuff to them at two houses in Denver next to each other, each with eight men. They came out of the house and most of them looked emaciated and their English wasn't good. We tried to talk to them. During after noon one of the men, Simon [Garang], asked me what I did. When I told him I was an English teacher, he asked me if I'd heard of Chinua Achebe, [the Nigerian author of *Things Fall Apart*.] Simon then named all of Achebe's titles and said that he'd read them all. I was amazed because I wasn't sure they had any education, given they'd fled when they were little boys. Simon told me he aspired to go to the university. He was 22 or 23. I also met "Kur Kur," who's also known as Peter Deng. It became apparent Simon and Kur had enough education in Kenya that they could apply for a GED. They both passed the GED and then both took the ACT, which is required for the University of Colorado. Both were working and they didn't have the time or money to take a preparation course. The admissions office had doubts when they saw the scores. But they did well enough that I could argue for them. I told them I was toughest teacher in English department and I said that I would stake my reputation that they would outwork the other students. And they have done wonderfully. In the beginning there were two, and now there are six at the University of Colorado and others of the guys are at community colleges. "Kur recently graduated magna cum laude, Bassoff notes.

Exceptional Case

Sometimes schools that are less impacted by a crush of refugee and asylee students from a multitude of countries are less jaded and can have a soft spot for students. And for a lucky few who have the right academic stuff and catch the right eyes, the support can be extensive, indeed.

Htar Htar Yu, a Middlebury College sophomore who is an asylum applicant from Burma, is a beneficiary of a Middlebury grants totaling \$42,000 last year. Halfway through her undergraduate education, she will at least be able to complete her education on a student visa, even if the asylum application is turned down, says Kathy Foley-Giorgio, associate dean of student affairs and director of international student and scholar services at Middlebury, which is located in Vermont.

"Vermont is a small state where individuals matter, and especially so at a place like Middlebury," says Foley-Giorgio. "We have selective admissions so the student has to be qualified to get in but once they're in, we fund financially based upon their needs, which we meet fully through grants, loans, and on-campus employment. I think once she was here and people realized her circumstances and that she was qualified to be here, they were willing to make the commitment to support her in a variety of ways."

Yu's family was exiled from Burma to Thailand because her father was a soldier in the army of a minority ethnic group, the Tavoyans, fighting the government. After spending time in a refugee camp at the Thai-Burmese border, she moved to Thailand itself and participated in the Youth for Understanding international exchange program. She was placed in Barre, Vermont, where she lived with a family and attended a local public high school for a year, sponsored initially by a church organization. While attending under a J-1 visa, she applied for a change of status from a J-1 to an F-1 visa to continue her schooling in the states, and, while the request was pending, she took ESL classes at Community College of Vermont in 2003. After completing them, she then returned home to Thailand in fall and winter 2003 and, while at home, applied to matriculate at Middlebury College in September 2004 and was subsequently accepted.

In December 2004, she filed for asylum because she knew she would face further persecution if she went home due to her parents' (and her own) political activities, Yu says.

"She filed her asylum application with assistance from a number of people, including Middlebury College community members and legal representation from the South Royalton Legal Clinic, which is affiliated with Vermont Law School," Foley-Giorgio says. "Many connections have been made linking individuals, communities, and schools across Vermont to help her navigate through her complex situation. Many individuals were motivated to help this incredibly interesting, talented, and driven woman as she pursues her dreams."

Giving Back

For many refugees and asylees, such dreams focus around using their hard-won educations to address the plight of their less fortunate countrymen in their countries of origin. For Yu, it means trying to extend her own educational good fortune to poor and refugee students in Thailand.

"I am very grateful to Middlebury College," Yu says. "They helped me with everything and the education has been great for me. I'm an anthropology major and I want to set up a school in Thailand to help educate disadvantaged children after I graduate and before I apply to grad school. In Thailand, there are a lot of orphans and refugee schools, but they only go to ninth or tenth grades. I want to set up a school to be bridge between those schools and college. It is very important that refugees and asylees make their own changes in their communities that last and they can never bring these changes unless they have higher education."

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DAVID TOBENKIN is a freelance writer in Chevy Chase, Maryland.