

“Education is the Most Important Thing”: Lessons in Empowering New Mainers Avery Leisle, Class of 2025

In the past five years, Brunswick has seen a sharp uptick in immigrant families, especially from Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Immigrant Resource Center of Maine (IRCM), with locations in Lewiston, Augusta, Portland, and Brunswick, is a non-profit helping immigrants learn English, apply to jobs, find housing, and receive childcare, via collaboration with other organizations like the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program. At the IRCM’s Brunswick location, called the Welcome Center, I interviewed over the course of the summer IRCM employees and associates to investigate, close-up, the finer caveats of integration, with a focus on English teaching and learning. After all, when an asylum seeker from Angola knows Portuguese, Spanish, and Lingála but little to no English, it’s extremely difficult for her to find a decent job and a willing landlord without help. Besides acting as a researcher, I also interned by helping immigrants learn English and apply to jobs. Ultimately there is an emphasis at IRCM on stability and empowerment; they help immigrants on the way to an independent life. Given this, my goal as both researcher and intern was to explore the extent to which employees and volunteers at the Welcome Center feel immigrants are empowered by the IRCM’s services. I was able, through both interviews and participant observation, to uncover how and why the IRCM feel their work is pivotal in helping guide immigrants to stability, but also how certain institutional and cultural obstacles make *permanent* stability an unnecessarily difficult thing to obtain—consequently hurting Maine’s economy. That is, a more stream-lined and accepting immigration system would allow newcomers in America to more efficiently fill the hole in Maine’s current labor pool.¹ Ultimately the IRCM is actively working to turn immigrants from government dependents to secure independents such that both immigrants and Mainers benefit. Empowerment at the IRCM is a matter of education; they empower immigrants by sharing knowledge of how to live as Americans.



I do English 'drills' with students. Students quickly echo what I say and learn new sentence structures and vocab

At the end of a two week English learning intensive at Bowdoin, the students graduated, dressed in robes Bowdoin kindly lent

Faculty Member: Krista Van Fleet

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¹ Pingree, Chellie. “We must let asylum seekers work — it will help them assimilate while boosting our economy.” *The Hill*, 9 March 2023