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NEW YORK

Retraining Program for Immigrant Engineers Faces Recruiting Hurdle

Some potential applicants are wary of signing up in light of stepped up deportations and calls to cut visas based on family ties



Mauton Whenu came to the U.S. two years ago with a master's degree in environmental design from the University of Lagos in Nigeria. The 25-year-old went from being a junior architect in Africa to delivering meals for a restaurant here. After taking classes at Cooper Union, he landed a job at Indus Architects in Manhattan. PHOTO: GO NAKAMURA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By *Leslie Brody*

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Myra Cabangon was a quality-control supervisor at a snack-food factory in the Philippines. But when she moved to the New York City area two years ago, the best job she could find was selling coffee on the overnight shift at an airport hotel.

She longed to boost her pay and use her background as a chemical engineer. Ms. Cabangon turned to a short retraining program at the Cooper Union, a venerable private college, that helps immigrant engineers reboot their résumés and rise above survival jobs such as washing dishes. Now, she works as a project assistant at an engineering firm, earning roughly triple the \$8.50-an-hour wage she made selling coffee.

"I am lucky and thankful," said the 33-year-old Queens resident, adding that she sees her current post as a launchpad. "Now I feel more confident."

Despite the Retraining Program for Immigrant Engineers's success helping about 225 immigrants yearly, organizers say it has become more difficult to fill seats because of recent U.S. immigration-policy changes. Student recruiter Ekaterina Zaitseva said that although the courses are free and participants must be in the U.S. legally, some potential applicants are wary of signing up in light of stepped up deportations and calls to decrease visas based on family ties.

She said enrollment in the program lags about 10% behind this point last August, with roughly 60 students signed up for the semester that starts in September. It aims to have 130 students attending this fall, plus a similar count in the spring.

"It's been increasingly difficult to find students," said Ms. Zaitseva, a workforce development manager at Camba Inc., a Brooklyn social-services agency that co-runs the retraining program. "There has been increased fear and distrust in immigrant communities."

Camba promotes the program through social media, fellow nonprofits and fliers in synagogues, mosques and churches.



The retraining program, based at Cooper Union, has helped about 225 immigrants yearly with free courses. Participants must be in the U.S. legally. PHOTO: GO NAKAMURA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The program has served more than 4,700 immigrants and refugees from more than 90 countries since it started in 1991, officials said. Direct costs will be \$415,000 this school year, paid through grants from the antipoverty foundation called Robin Hood, Con Edison and Cooper Union.

Cooper Union cites a high payoff: Participants' average wages jumped to about \$23 an hour in their first job after the program last year, up from \$9.59. That meant rising to an average annual salary of roughly \$47,000, with 15% earning at least \$75,000.

Fred Fontaine, director of the retraining program, said New York can't afford to waste these immigrants' talents in technology.

"These are very highly skilled people," he said. "It helps everyone in the city if you can harness their skills."

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Mauton Whenu came to the U.S. two years ago with a master's degree in environmental design from the University of Lagos in Nigeria. The 25-year-old went from being a junior architect in Africa to delivering meals for a restaurant here.

When he heard about the program, he signed up for four classes on construction industry regulations. With Cooper Union's name on his résumé, he got calls back from firms that previously had rejected his applications.

Currently, he works as a junior architect at Indus Architects in lower Manhattan. "Now I get to use my brain," he said. "The program gave me the opportunity to network with people with like minds. We want to make the American dream."

The courses of eight to 12 weeks, at night and on weekends, focus on vocational skills such as structural steel design, building-cost estimating, software quality assurance and green building guidelines.

Applicants must have a bachelor's degree or higher, with professional experience in engineering, information technology or a related field. Officials said students must be authorized to work in America: Most have green cards, some are seeking political asylum, and all plan to become U.S. citizens.

Write to Leslie Brody at leslie.brody@wsj.com

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