

Opening the Toolbox

Barriers to Immigrant Professional Mentorship
and Networking Programs





Centre for Business Insights on Immigration

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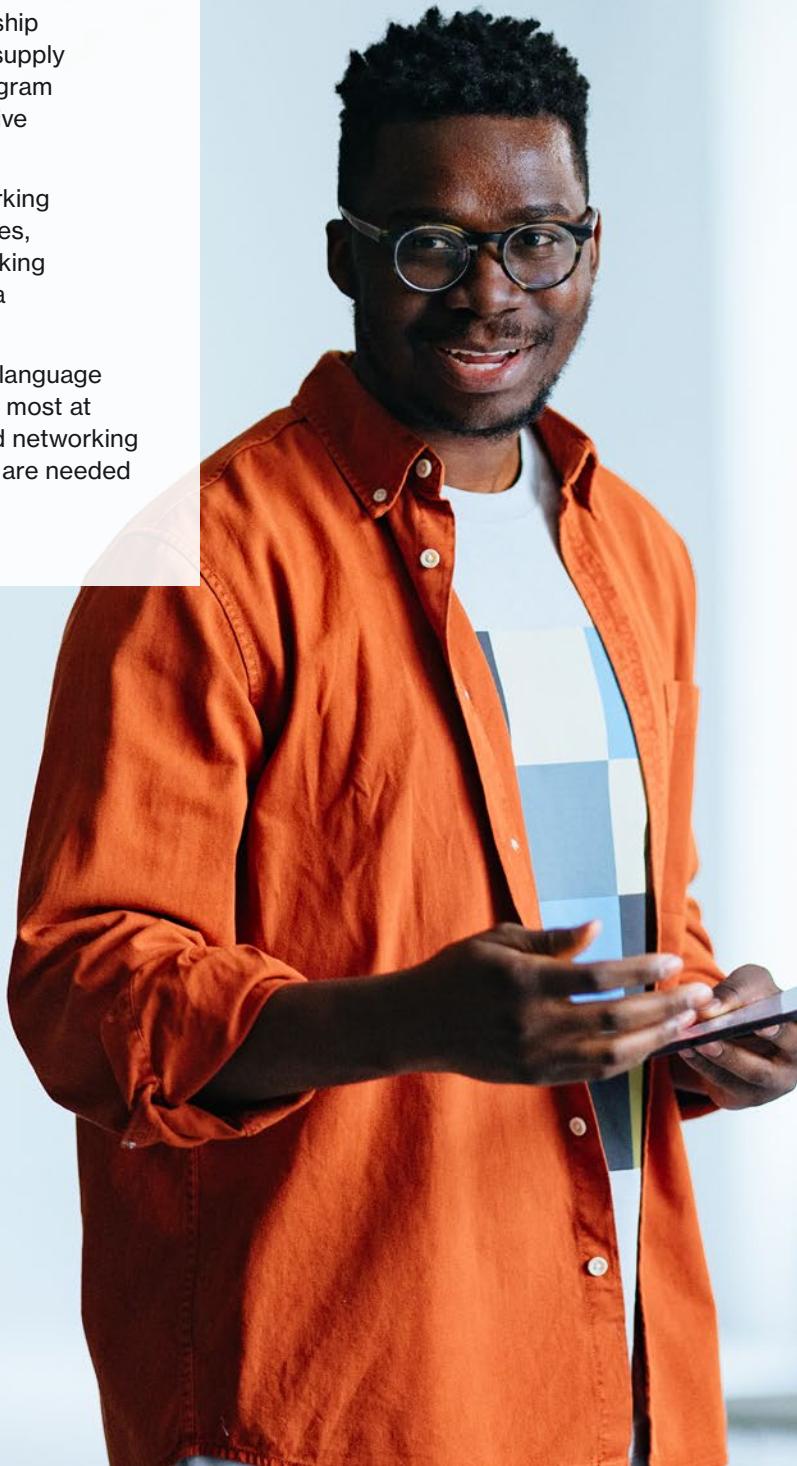
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Highlights

- Professional mentorship and networking programs show promise for improving immigrant labour market outcomes, but the lack of comprehensive and rigorous evaluation means their true effectiveness—positive or negative—remains uncertain.
- Accessibility barriers limit uptake of professional mentorship and networking programs. These include an insufficient supply of mentors—particularly in specialized fields—lack of program awareness, geographic and linguistic challenges, restrictive eligibility criteria, and siloed program delivery systems.
- Digital innovations in professional mentorship and networking programs are emerging to address accessibility challenges, including AI-powered matching algorithms, digital networking platforms, and virtual program delivery. But they are not a holistic solution to the barriers that immigrants face.
- Individuals with lower levels of digital literacy and official language skills, and those without access to digital technology, are most at risk of facing barriers to accessing digital mentorship and networking services. Inclusive design and thoughtful implementation are needed to ensure universal access and benefits.



Professional mentorship and networking in Canada

Immigrants face persistent challenges integrating into Canada's labour market.

They need to overcome two obstacles: labour market barriers specific to immigrants (such as credential recognition processes), and the employment and earnings gap between immigrants and people born in Canada with similar qualifications.¹ In 2019, the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) estimated that closing immigrant employment and wage gaps could contribute \$50 billion to the Canadian economy, or 2.5 per cent of GDP.²

Professional mentorship and networking programs have emerged as promising tools to help immigrants integrate into the labour market. They connect immigrants with established professionals who can provide career guidance, industry insights, and access to opportunities that are crucial for attaining employment and closing earnings gaps. Research has found that these programs can have positive effects on important labour market outcomes like earnings and employment rates.³

Despite the benefits of professional mentorship and networking programs, uptake is low. Statistics Canada data reveals that between 2016 and 2020, fewer than 10 per cent of immigrants accessed any federally funded employment-related settlement services.⁴ While not all newcomers arriving in Canada need support in finding employment, such as those with job offers on arrival, research is needed to understand the barriers facing those who require these services but are not accessing them.

To better understand this uptake challenge, we conducted a literature review. Our focus was on the impact of professional mentorship and networking on immigrant labour market outcomes, the accessibility barriers that immigrants face accessing these programs, and innovations in program delivery. (See Appendix A for full methodology.)

This review points to pitfalls in how we measure participant outcomes and our limited knowledge about accessibility barriers faced by immigrants. This gap persists in an environment that is changing as a result of innovation and the use of digital technology. Addressing this knowledge gap is critical for administering and funding programs that are accessible to newcomers and that will deliver on the promise of improving the labour market outcomes for immigrants in Canada.

1 Dinc, *The "Canadian Experience" Disconnect: Immigrant Selection, Economic Settlement, and Hiring*.

2 Agopsowicz and Billy-Ochieng, *Untapped Potential: Canada Needs to Close Its Immigrant Wage Gap*.

3 ALLIES, *The results are in: Mentoring improves employment outcomes for skilled immigrants*; Nardon and others, *Improving Immigrant Inclusion in the Workplace*; Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, *Demand for & Impact of Mentoring Newcomer Professionals*.

4 Statistics Canada, "Proportion of adult immigrants admitted from 2016 to 2020 who accessed federally funded settlement services, by type of services and immigration category."



Mentorship and networking programs hold promise

Programs show direct and indirect impacts on labour market outcomes

According to program evaluations, professional mentorship and networking programs help newcomers find better jobs, faster. A survey of 1,900 mentees in mentoring programs in eight cities compared employment outcomes of program participants at two points in time. The survey found that unemployment rates of participants decreased from 73 per cent at the time of mentoring to 19 per cent one year after program completion.⁵ Program participants also secured jobs that matched their expertise and skill level; 71 per cent of participants reported working in their field after 12 months of mentoring as opposed to 27 per cent before mentoring.⁶ These outcomes were reflected in the 62 per cent increase in average full-time earnings one year after participation. These results, while promising, were not compared to a control group of non-participants.

In a 2019 report, participants in the Ottawa Job Match Network program said the program played a key role in securing employment, with many obtaining well-paid positions in line with their qualifications, as reported and defined by program participants.⁷ After three months, participants of the Toronto Region

Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) mentoring program were also 2.5 times more likely than non-participants to find a full-time, permanent job with benefits and career advancement opportunities.⁸

Mentorship and networking programs are also reported to build skills that indirectly contribute to improved labour market outcomes. According to a TRIEC report, mentored participants were almost four times more likely than non-participants to expand their professional networks within three months of completing the program.⁹ Other reported benefits of mentorship programs include improved job search and application skills, increased knowledge of hiring processes and norms (requirements of their field, employers' expectations, the job market, and Canadian workplace culture), and greater networking capacity.¹⁰ These work-relevant soft skills were also reported as key benefits of mentorship programs by the Panel on Employment Challenges of New Canadians in consultation and survey research with service providers and immigrants.¹¹ While these statistics suggest strong potential, they must be interpreted cautiously given the limitations of the evaluation methods.

5 ALLIES, *The results are in: Mentoring improves employment outcomes for skilled immigrants.*

6 ALLIES, *The results are in: Mentoring improves employment outcomes for skilled immigrants.*

7 Nardon and others, *Improving Immigrant Inclusion in the Workplace.*

8 Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, *Demand for & Impact of Mentoring Newcomer Professionals.*

9 Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, *Demand for & Impact of Mentoring Newcomer Professionals.*

10 Naveed, *A Newcomer Employment Resilience Network NL (NERN NL) – Optimizing Connections; Making the Match;* Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, *Demand for & Impact of Mentoring Newcomer Professionals;* Nardon and others, *Improving Immigrant Inclusion in the Workplace.*

11 Panel on Employment Challenges of New Canadians, *Survival to Success: Transforming Immigrant Outcomes.*

Measuring impact requires more thorough and integrated approaches

Although several programs show positive outcomes, the lack of comprehensive data and rigorous evaluation means the true effectiveness of mentorship and networking programs—positive or negative—remains uncertain. Many programs lack publicly available reviews or performance statistics, and there are limited examples of studies that examine impact across programs.¹² A lack of cross-program comparison makes it difficult to understand how factors like program length and program delivery model impact outcomes.

Significantly, few studies compare program participants and non-participants, making it unclear whether observed outcomes are from program participation or would have occurred anyway. Meanwhile, studies that make such comparisons fail to control for factors that contribute to program participation, such as motivation levels. This creates a potential selection bias in the results. If program participants are inherently more motivated to find employment—hence their reason for joining professional mentorship and networking programs—they will have better employment outcomes regardless of program effectiveness. This link between motivation and labour market outcomes has been demonstrated both among immigrants¹³ and in a broader context.¹⁴

Also largely missing from program evaluations are measures that capture labour market outcomes beyond employment rates and earnings, such as skill match. Capturing which sector or industry an immigrant works in before and after participating in mentorship and networking programs would show if there is an association between program completion and overcoming skill transferability issues that immigrants face when trying to get into their field of expertise.

With rigorous and integrated analyses, the impact of professional mentorship and networking programs on immigrant integration can be more fully understood. As services offered to immigrants are being streamlined, program funders and administrators need this information to focus their resources on programs that evidence shows positively impact immigrant labour market outcomes.



12 ALLIES, *The results are in: Mentoring improves employment outcomes for skilled immigrants.*

13 Impicciatore and Molinari, "Motivation matters"; Kanas and Steinmetz, "Economic Outcomes of Immigrants with Different Migration Motives." family/reunification, and humanitarian/forced migrants

14 Liu, Huang, and Wang, "Effectiveness of job search interventions."



Barriers to mentorship and networking programs

While mentorship programs show promise, their potential is limited by persistent barriers that prevent many immigrants from accessing them. Recent research has identified accessibility barriers to professional mentorship and networking programs, barriers that can be grouped into three primary categories: insufficient number of mentors, program awareness and accessibility, and structural program limitations.

Insufficient mentor supply creates bottlenecks

The most frequently cited barrier is the chronic shortage of qualified mentors. TRIEC estimated that, in 2019, the potential demand for mentors in key destination cities (Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa, Halifax, London) varied from 1,500 to 58,900 but that only around 100 to 2,000 immigrants were matched with a mentor.¹⁵ Staff at immigrant-serving organizations have identified critical mentor shortages across multiple professional sectors including engineering, architecture, information technology, marketing, media and communications, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and insurance.¹⁶

These shortages make it particularly difficult for immigrants in specialized and high-demand fields to access professional mentorship and networking services. According to the CEO of a non-profit that created a digital mentorship platform, recruiting and retaining qualified mentors, particularly in specialized professions, is a challenge for traditional professional mentorship and networking programs.¹⁷

Administrative inefficiencies compound this supply problem. Researchers from Sheridan College found that some programs experience mentor hoarding, where employment coaches who are responsible for matching mentors and mentees do not share contacts of prospective mentors with other coaches, limiting matching opportunities.¹⁸ Budget constraints have also been found to further restrict program administrators' abilities to create awareness and actively recruit mentors.¹⁹

¹⁵ Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, *Demand for & Impact of Mentoring Newcomer Professionals*.

¹⁶ Zhang, "Socializing Immigrant Jobseekers: The Role of Pre-Employment Mentoring Programs"; Chaze and others, *Facilitators and Barriers to Mentoring Newcomers to Canada*; Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, *Demand for & Impact of Mentoring Newcomer Professionals*.

¹⁷ Yusuf and Gurtsishvili, "Digital Mentorship Enhances Immigrant Workforce Integration in Canada."

¹⁸ Chaze and others, *Facilitators and Barriers to Mentoring Newcomers to Canada*.

¹⁹ Chaze and others, *Facilitators and Barriers to Mentoring Newcomers to Canada*.

Awareness and accessibility gaps limit program participation

Service providers have also identified program awareness and a lack of understanding of program benefits as barriers to prospective program participants.²⁰ Research on mentorship programs published in 2021 found that, for some immigrants, mentorship represents an unfamiliar concept, particularly for immigrants from cultures where such formal relationships are uncommon.²¹ Others view mentorship as appropriate only for junior professionals. This perception gap represents a fundamental barrier that prevents newcomers from using mentorship as a career development strategy.

Geographic barriers are also cited as an accessibility challenge.²² Smaller communities often lack adequate public transportation systems, making participation in in-person programs difficult.²³ Rural areas face the dual challenge of limited mentor availability and geographic isolation from in-person program delivery sites.²⁴



20 Windmill, "Addressing Canada's 'mentoring gap' could unleash the potential of newcomers"; Yusuf and Gurtsishvili, "Digital Mentorship Enhances Immigrant Workforce Integration in Canada."

21 Lam and Bucci, *Snapp: Using Tech to Lower Barriers to Mentorship*.

22 Yusuf and Gurtsishvili, "Digital Mentorship Enhances Immigrant Workforce Integration in Canada."

23 Lam and Bucci, *Snapp: Using Tech to Lower Barriers to Mentorship*.

24 Lam and Bucci, *Snapp: Using Tech to Lower Barriers to Mentorship*.

Structural program limitations create participation barriers

Research in 2021 found that many mentorship programs maintain eligibility requirements that inadvertently exclude substantial portions of the immigrant population.²⁵ Organized mentorship and networking programs that require participants to have permanent resident status exclude temporary workers, international students, and other newcomers. Equally, programs that have language requirements, particularly advanced English proficiency standards, exclude many newcomers who could benefit from mentorship support but have not yet achieved the fluency levels required to be eligible for programs.²⁶

Career-specific restrictions that require participants to seek employment in their former profession also limit options for immigrants considering career transitions²⁷ or for those whose credentials face regulatory barriers, despite their being in need of mentors and a professional network.

Time commitment requirements present further challenges for newcomers managing pressures like finding and keeping survival jobs or managing fluctuating work schedules.²⁸ Programs typically require two- to three-month commitments or mandate that applicants complete employment preparation courses before matching, with no guarantee of successful pairing. A 2024 study reported time commitments also act as a barrier to recruiting mentors and can undermine mentorship-mentee relationships if mentors do not have the time to fully engage in the program.²⁹

The siloed nature of mentorship programs creates inefficiencies that exacerbate individual barriers.³⁰ The program-based funding model has promoted competition between program providers as well as exclusive strategic partnerships between service providers and other organizations like employers.³¹ Service organizations rarely collaborate to share mentor pools or cross-refer participants, meaning immigrants may wait extended periods for matches within one program while suitable mentors exist in other organizations. This lack of coordination particularly disadvantages newcomers in smaller communities or specialized professions where mentor availability is already limited.

To address the numerous accessibility barriers, service providers and innovators are using emerging digital solutions to explore new ways to connect immigrants with mentors.

25 Lam and Bucci, Snapp: *Using Tech to Lower Barriers to Mentorship*.

26 Lam and Bucci, Snapp: *Using Tech to Lower Barriers to Mentorship*.

27 Lam and Bucci, Snapp: *Using Tech to Lower Barriers to Mentorship*.

28 Lam and Bucci, Snapp: *Using Tech to Lower Barriers to Mentorship*.

29 Zhang and Nardon, "Pre-Employment Mentoring Programs and Immigrant Labor Market Integration."

30 Lam and Bucci, Snapp: *Using Tech to Lower Barriers to Mentorship*.

31 Zhang and Nardon, "Pre-Employment Mentoring Programs and Immigrant Labor Market Integration."



Innovations in mentorship and networking programs

Innovations in the professional mentorship and networking space have largely focused on incorporating technology into program delivery. This includes designing digital mentoring platforms, and virtual mentorship and networking events. Few innovations focus on addressing foundational issues in professional networking and mentorship programs such as the mentor supply. One example of such a focus is a service provider in Alberta that provides compensation for mentors to reduce volunteer fatigue.³²

Digital platforms have been developed to facilitate peer networking and to increase access to mentors, while AI-powered matching systems serve to streamline the matching process.³³ These innovations are promising, as digital mentoring platforms can draw mentor professionals from across Canada as opposed to traditional mentorship programs that have to rely on limited local networks to identify potential mentors.³⁴

The use of digital platforms can also address the mismatch between the desire for services and the delivery and availability of services. For example, young people are one demographic group that report a preference for in-person connection with the option to also meet virtually.³⁵ Applying digital tools to mentorship programs can help youth access these programs and build professional connections using virtual meeting capabilities. This innovation can also help serve immigrants in rural communities as well as those with disabilities or demanding work or childcare schedules.

However, leveraging these digital solutions requires inclusive design and thoughtful implementation. While service providers have long used digital service delivery to serve large geographic areas, our previous research found that digital services do not always mean clients are better served.³⁶ Research by the Royal Society of Canada found that virtual service delivery is not a good option for individuals who have lower levels of official language skills, limited digital literacy, or limited access to IT.³⁷

³² Alberta Immigrant Mentorship Network, "Empowering Mentorship through Technology."

³³ CIPS Alberta, "ICT Mentorship Program for Immigrants: Guiding Canadian Tech Careers"; Immigrant Networks, "Research shows immigrants with professional networks succeed faster professionally!"; Yusuf and Gurtsishvili, "Unlocking Potential: How Digital Mentorship Supports Immigrants in Canada."

³⁴ CIPS Alberta, "ICT Mentorship Program for Immigrants."

³⁵ Alberta Immigrant Mentorship Network, "Empowering Mentorship through Technology."

³⁶ Dennler, *Making Rural Immigration Work*.

³⁷ Esses and others, *Supporting Canada's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery Through Robust Immigration Policy and Programs*.

Service providers have also reported challenges with these initial digital innovations. Ensuring high-quality services, and maintaining relationships with non-immigration partners, like employers, is challenging in a virtual-only service environment.³⁸ The ability to sustain relationships with non-immigration partners is critical for service providers to conduct mentorship and networking programs that rely heavily on professional relational networks and volunteers.

In the absence of clear guidance from program funders on the inclusive development and implementation of digital tools, program administrators themselves recommend starting digital innovation and transformation with core organizational needs, implementing technology gradually, and maintaining the “human touch” in the matching process while using AI and other digital tools to improve efficiency and scale.³⁹ Our previous work shows that involving immigrants in the conception, design, and implementation of changes to programs and tools is good practice.⁴⁰

Including rigorous testing and feedback phases to technology adoption can also ensure that clients remain well-served and avoid the replication or exacerbation of existing barriers to accessing mentorship and networking programs.⁴¹ Digital innovations offer new possibilities for expanding access to mentorship and networking programs, but if the foundational access issues are not addressed, the impact of the digital innovations will remain uneven.



Where we need to go from here

Although professional mentorship and networking programs show promise, rigorous evaluations are lacking. This leaves service providers and funders without clear guidance on program investment decisions. Furthermore, many immigrants are unaware that professional mentorship and networking programs exist, or they face barriers that prevent access. Though useful in some contexts, digital innovations in program delivery exacerbate barriers for immigrants with lower official language skills and lower digital literacy.

Understanding outcomes and addressing barriers is critical to designing a high-performing immigrant service sector with the right tools to help immigrants integrate into the labour market. Implementing these tools in an inclusive and thoughtful manner is critical to improving individual immigrant outcomes and benefiting Canada’s economy more broadly.

Our future research will assess program participants against non-participants and control for key factors like motivation level to flesh out the relationship between professional mentorship and networking and immigrant labour market outcomes. We will also explore the barriers immigrants face and provide evidence-based recommendations to program administrators and funders to achieve this goal.

38 Dennler, *Making Rural Immigration Work*.

39 CIPS Alberta, “ICT Mentorship Program for Immigrants: Guiding Canadian Tech Careers”; Immigrant Networks, “Research shows immigrants with professional networks succeed faster professionally!”; Immigrant Muse, “Organizations Offering Mentorship Programs in Canada;” Yusuf and Gurtishvili, “Digital Mentorship Enhances Immigrant Workforce Integration in Canada”; Alberta Immigrant Mentorship Network, “Empowering Mentorship through Technology.”

40 Craft, Guccini, and Monteiro, *Building Inclusive Communities Amid Immigration Shifts*.

41 Craft, Guccini, and Monteiro, *Building Inclusive Communities Amid Immigration Shifts*.

Appendix A

Methodology

This narrative literature review was designed to gather insights on the ecosystem of immigrant mentorship and networking programs and on known barriers facing immigrants accessing mentorship programs. It is part of a research project aiming to understand the following:

- how participation in mentorship programs impacts the labour market outcomes of immigrants in Canada
- what barriers immigrants face in accessing immigrant mentorship and professional networking programs
- what supports or resources immigrants need to overcome the identified barriers to accessing mentorship and professional networking programs

We aimed to answer the following questions in this review:

- What are the labour market outcomes for immigrants who participate in professional mentorship and networking programs?
- What accessibility barriers are known to exist for immigrants participating in mentorship/professional networking programs?
- Where have there been innovations in immigrant mentorship/professional networking?

Literature selection

We selected literature that was most relevant to the research questions based on article type, study data, date of publication, and study sample characteristics. We reviewed academic literature such as journal articles, peer-reviewed research papers, and grey literature such as research reports from program evaluations, policy briefs, and policy papers. We prioritized sources that contained empirical data, such as program evaluations or program analysis that were directly related to immigrant mentorship and networking programs. We selected literature published between 2005 and 2025 to ensure the relevance of findings to the current Canadian immigration system. We selected content with a focus on mentorship and networking programs and a specific focus on immigrant populations; some studies included refugee populations. We prioritized literature that included sample populations from the Canadian context, but we also included global literature. Global literature was included if the sample population was made up of immigrants and refugees. We reviewed 75 sources in this literature review.

Literature review and analysis

We adopted an analytical framework that reviewed the literature relative to the categories of inquiry shown in Table 1.

Each source was assessed for relevance and validity through an initial review of the full text. Relevance review was based on the date of release and the population of focus. Peer-reviewed articles were also assessed based on study sample characteristics, size, country of origin of sample, gender/sex, geographic location.

Table 1
Literature review analytical framework

Criterion	Included in analysis
Article type	Policy brief Journal article Blog post Book Book chapter Research report Program evaluations Program webpage
Date of release	2005–2025
Population	Immigrants Refugees Immigrant mentees Mentors in immigrant mentorship programs
Study sample characteristics	Size Country of origin Gender/Sex Location
Key findings	All key findings in selected literature
Identified gaps in knowledge	All identified gaps in knowledge in selected literature

Source: Signal49 Research.

Two researchers participated in an independent literature selection process with any conflicts resolved through reviewer discussion.

The literature was analyzed by categorizing the key findings and research gaps into themes. This thematic analysis was based on the three research questions for the review, namely (1) findings and gaps related to labour market outcomes of participants and non-participants of immigrant professional mentorship and networking programs; (2) findings and gaps related to accessibility barriers to immigrant professional mentorship and networking programs; and (3) findings and gaps related to innovations in immigrant professional mentorship and networking programs.

Limitations

A limitation of this review is that it relies on a number of program evaluations that service providers themselves conducted and published. Not all of the program evaluations included in this review were conducted by the service providers themselves, and where an option was available, we selected the program evaluation that was conducted by a third party, such as a university, over the self-conducted evaluation. We validated the underlying claims in the self-conducted evaluations through peer-reviewed articles and the broader literature.

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