The Pacific Islander population in the U.S. continues to grow, with the Portland-Salem, Oregon area serving as one of the largest communities, notably among those from the Micronesian region. Migrants emigrate for a variety of reasons including educational and employment opportunities, improved healthcare, and assisting family members. The purpose of this study is to better understand the transition of Micronesians – specifically Chuukese, Marshallese, and Palauans – to Oregon and to identify factors that help or hinder that transition. The study utilizes a Migration with Dignity framework, assessing reasons for emigration to the U.S., experienced quality of life, especially livelihoods, potential reasons for (not) returning to one’s home country, and barriers and facilitating factors for an improved quality of life in Oregon.

Keywords: migration with dignity, livelihoods, climate change, Micronesia, Oregon

1. Introduction

Travel is a long-established quality for Pacific Islanders. Intrepid navigators have traversed sea highways for thousands of years and have maintained that mobility through inter-island voyages. As their ancestors sought opportunities in other places, Micronesians¹ – one of the three major sub-regions of the Pacific Islands – today continue to establish new footholds. Migration has profound implications on the person (kin) and place (land), a phenomenon that manifests itself both at the individual and community levels [1]. Shifts in population and dispersal through migration confront transnational boundaries and the viability of a community. As migration entails complex understandings of identity and place, improved understanding can lead to better experiences across communities. The purpose of this study is to better understand the transition and livelihoods of Micronesians moving to Oregon, as well as factors that help or hinder that transition.² The study utilizes a Migration with Dignity framework,³ assessing the reasons for emigration to the U.S., experienced quality of life (especially livelihoods), potential reasons for (not) returning to one’s home country, and the barriers and facilitating factors for an improved quality of life.

This article begins with an overview of the political underpinnings of the three Pacific Island nations that comprise the COFA communities. The study’s research methodology is then reviewed. Key findings are highlighted, leading to an examination of the challenges and opportunities to facilitate migration with dignity.

2. Trust and Compact

Colonial powers in Micronesia have shifted from Spain to Germany to Japan to the United States. Following the end of World War II, the United Nations set up the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (USTTPI) administered by the U.S. Navy (1947–1951) and the U.S. Department of the Interior (1951–1986 for the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands – and 1951–1994 for Palau). The Trust Territories were situated in a vast area of 2,000 islands and over three million square miles of ocean comprised of seven administrative districts: the Northern Mariana Islands, the Marshall Islands, Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, Yap, and Palau. Discussions in the late 1960s and early 1970s between the territories and the U.S. resulted in politically fragmented island states, with the Northern Mariana Islands favoring commonwealth status, the Marshall Islands and Palau choosing to become republics, and the remaining island states (Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, and Yap) choosing to federate. More recently, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Republic of Palau (ROP) entered into unique political relationships with the U.S. known as “free association”

¹ Micronesia refers to a subregion of Oceania, comprised of multiple island nations with shared features. Other subregions include Polynesia to the east and Melanesia to the south.
² This study accompanies a sister study of first-generation Marshallese who emigrated to Springdale, Arkansas. In partnership with the Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese, a white paper is forthcoming.
³ The concept of “migration with dignity” is rooted in a relocation policy first advanced by the government of Kiribati, which seeks to equip migrants with useful skills, thereby benefitting both the sending and receiving countries [2–4].
in which they retain national sovereignty. The Compact of Free Association (COFA) between the U.S. and FSM and RMI was adopted by the U.S. Congress and signed into law on November 13, 1986. On October 1, 1994, a Compact with the Republic of Palau took effect. These Compacts establish special relationships between the former Trust Territories and the U.S.

Micronesians from three of the former Trust Territories – FSM, RMI, and ROP – are allowed entry into the U.S. and its territories to live and work without restriction. Under this agreement, the U.S. holds responsibility and authority for the states’ security and provides economic aid and disaster relief assistance and government services. The Compact grants citizens from the three Pacific Island nations free entry to “lawfully engage in occupations and establish residence as a non-immigrant in the United States and its territories” (Article 4, Section 141).

With the implementation of the Compact, emigration immediately accelerated, particularly to Guam. Within two years, 1,100 Chuukese were living there [5]. Most came in search of jobs though some came for better healthcare and educational opportunities. With Guam’s economic downturn in the late 1990s, Hawai‘i and the U.S. mainland became attractive destinations. From Chuuk state in particular, resident communities had already been established by trailblazers in Honolulu, Hawai‘i; Portland and Salem, Oregon; and Corsicana, Texas, among other places. These became footholds for others to follow.

Given the unique immigration status of the COFA communities (that is to say, the U.S. communities that host many Pacific migrants entering under the COFA), there is a growing interest among policymakers and researchers to better understand these populations, which have been relatively invisible. The research is part of a larger effort detailed in this Special Issue Climate Change, Migration, and Vulnerability to better understand displacement due to climate change and sea-level rise in the Pacific Islands.

As the impacts of climate change threaten to displace millions of people, island nations are particularly at risk. Advocates call for immigration frameworks that facilitate migration in which migrants are protected and prepared to contribute to receiving countries [3, 4]. Re-establishing livelihoods is an essential step for successful migration that has been little studied [6].

3. Research Methodology

During a three-month period from October 6–December 6, 2018, 76 interviews were conducted in the Portland and Salem, Oregon area with individuals born in Chuuk (FSM), RMI, and Palau. Interviews were conducted by the Environmental Law Institute (ELI) and the Micronesian Islander Community (MIC)5 and followed a standardized set of 44 questions seeking demographic information (e.g., gender, age, birthplace, marital status, level of education, years living in Oregon), information relating to their arrival in Oregon, perceptions of life and of livelihoods, and information related to the role of climate change in their decisions to leave and potentially return. Questions were adopted from a case study on the transition of first-generation Marshallese to Springdale, Arkansas, with the research design and interview questions constructed to better understand the transition with particular emphasis on lives and livelihoods as well as to elicit key challenges and opportunities [7].

The research design utilized semi-structured interviews, allowing for versatility to texturize the data, thus “attending to the depth and complexity of individual lives positioned with overlapping and interacting contexts” [8]. Each interview took approximately 45–60 minutes to complete. Interviews were conducted in English, Chuukese, or Palauan based on the level of comfort and ability by the interviewer and participant, without the need for interpretation services. The results of these interviews are intentionally left anonymous to foster candidin in response.

In addition to interviews with migrants, informational interviews were conducted with the FSM Consulate General in Portland, the Oregon Health Authority, and the non-profit organization Living Islands, among others, and a site visit to a Chuukese church (New Life) in Portland.

3.1. Participant Recruitment

Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older and first-generation Micronesians living in Oregon (and neighboring Vancouver, Washington). Specifically, there were three jurisdictions of interest: Chuuk, Marshall Islands, and Palau. These groups were identified as both represented in the Oregon Micronesian community as well as accessible by interviewers from MIC and ELI. As the project focused on the transition of people from Micronesia to the U.S., the interviewees must have been born in their respective countries and have moved to Oregon at the time of the interview.

Individuals were selected via known associations within the three communities and via a “network sampling” approach [9] in which interview participants were asked if they had recommendations for others to participate. Geographical location centered on Portland and Salem, the two larger population centers in the Willamette Valley and a known area home to Micronesians.

4. COFA Community Profiles

A total of 76 interviews were conducted with first-generation Pacific Islanders, comprising 39 Chuukese,

4. In exchange for economic interests by the three nations, the U.S. gained global strategic interests through exclusive rights to operate in the large Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) to the exclusion of other militaries. The contract is voluntary in nature and renewable. In 2003 the Compact II, similar to the first Compact, was signed.

5. ELI partnered with the MIC, a non-profit organization based in Oregon, to focus on the transition of people from Micronesia to Oregon within a broader collaboration effort between the Environmental Law Institute, The University of Tokyo, and Hosei University to research the experiences of Pacific Islanders who migrate to the U.S.
20 Marshallese, and 17 Palauans. Overall, 36% of the participants were male, 64% female. The Chuukese cohort was predominantly female (67%), average age of 38, majority married (54%), and majority with children (69%), some of whom also had grandchildren (15%). All were FSM citizens except one who had recently become a U.S. citizen. Education levels were widely distributed, with 62% having attended college (33% of whom earned a degree) and 23% not having attended high school. Across all three cohorts, educational achievement disaggregated by gender was comparable, with 41% of males and 39% of females earning a high school diploma or less and 59% of males and 61% of females matriculating in a college or university. However, a gender signal emerges for those who earned a college degree: 15% for males compared to 27% for females.

English language proficiency among the Chuukese cohort was widely distributed, with 33% indicating fluency, 28% conversational ability, and 33% limited proficiency. The majority were born on the Chuuk Lagoon island group (72%) with the remainder born on the outer islands. Most (80%) lived in rental housing, with an average of 5.77 members per household. Church attendance was high (82%) and evenly divided among Protestant (48%) and Catholic (52%).

All three cohorts shared similar demographic features though distinct differences emerged as well. For instance, the Palauan cohort had a comparatively high prevalence of dual citizenship (35% had dual citizenship with the U.S.), and some had become sole U.S. citizens (12%). The Palauan cohort also had greater educational achievement, with nearly all (94%) having attended college, some of whom earned a degree (31%). College matriculation rates were lowest among the Marshallese cohort (30%). Notably, all three cohorts had low college graduation rates. English fluency was lowest among the Chuukese cohort (33%) compared to the Marshallese cohort (40%) and the Palauan cohort (82%). The Palauan cohort had a much higher rate of home ownership (59%) than the other two cohorts (5% for Chuukese and Marshallese). This rate is comparable to the overall owner-occupied housing unit rate (2013–2017) for Oregon (62%) and Portland (53%) [10]. The Marshallese cohort had the highest rate of church attendance (95%, compared to 82% for Chuukese and 59% for Palauans), all of whom attend Protestant churches, whereas the other two cohorts showed greater balance between Protestant and Catholic.

5. Key Findings

5.1. Transition to Oregon

Arrival dates to Oregon varied significantly, both within and across the three cohorts. The Palauan cohort had a much earlier median year of arrival of 1990, followed by the Chuukese and RMI cohorts with median years of arrival of 2008 and 2012 respectively. All three cohorts included participants who arrived as recently as 2018, while the earliest arrival was 1975 among the Palauans, 1976 among the Chuukese, and a relatively more recent 1991 among the Marshallese. Among the Chuukese cohort, only 38% came directly to Oregon via FSM, with the majority having previously lived in other locations (28% Hawai‘i, 23% Guam, and 11% other). For the Marshallese, the majority came directly to Oregon from FSM (55%), with the remainder having previously lived elsewhere (30% Hawai‘i, 10% Arkansas). Among the Palauan cohort, relatively few came to Oregon directly via Palau (31%), with the remainder having previously lived in a variety of locations including Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and other U.S. states. These locations serve as important stepping stones to gain experience with American culture and improve one’s English language skills (see Table 1).

Across the three cohorts, education, jobs, health, and family were the largest motivating drivers to emigrate, with notable variance (see Table 2). The interview design allowed for multiple answers, which served to identify contributing drivers.7 Among the Chuukese cohort, education and jobs were the most common reasons for immigrating to the U.S., as indicated by nearly half of the cohort (49% for each), followed by family responsibilities (33%), health concerns (31%), and climate change (8%).8 The majority emigrated within one month of deciding (59%), nearly all of whom stayed with a family member (immediate or extended) upon arrival. Respondent #10, who emigrated for educational opportunities, stated “In senior year of high school, I made up my mind to go to school outside Chuuk. It didn’t take me long because I know what I want.” Her sister was already living in the U.S. and sent money for airfare. Several who traveled for medical reasons needed more than six months to...

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6. Interestingly, one Palauan identified with the Modekgi religious movement, a monotheistic religious movement founded in the early 20th century and practiced throughout Palau.

7. As multiple responses could be given for the interview question, totals may be greater than 100%.

8. To assess “climate change,” a proxy of “sea-level rise” was used.
place their affairs in order. Respondent #14 explained: “It was planned two years prior to me leaving for Oregon. I wanted to return home to see my family after living in Guam for several years. My aunt said I had to go and I left after one year of returning home to see my family.” Respondent #36, who waited more than six months, reported that he was “waiting for relatives to help pay for our tickets.” For others, the wait was shorter. Respondent #22 reported “The authority of Northwest [Airlines] paid for my air ticket since it was a medical emergency.”

Among the Marshallese cohort, reasons for immigrating to the U.S. were family responsibilities (85%), education (70%), health concerns (55%), jobs (40%) and climate change (25%). The majority came within one month of deciding, with Respondent #18 having just one-day notice: “One day, my dad told me to go to the U.S. tomorrow to visit my family.” Climate change appears to be a growing concern, with Respondent #31 explaining that “[Climate change] is an issue today, but not in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since 2012, the issue became more apparent with high tide and why people are coming now.”

Among the Palauan cohort, the starkest difference was the reason for immigrating, with 94% citing education (family responsibilities at 29% was the second-most cited reason). Of those who matriculated in a college or university, 31% earned a degree. Notably, among those who earned a degree, all cited education as a primary motivator for emigrating to the U.S.

5.2. Livelihoods

Across all three cohorts and disaggregating by gender, males had an employment rate of 74% and females a comparable rate of 69%. All three cohorts showed similar labor force rates, with the Palauan rate the highest (88%) and the Chuukese the lowest (63%). For the 14 Chuukese who were without jobs, all but two were part of the working-age population (15–64), with an average age of 35.8 (9 females, 5 males). Overall these rates are comparable to – and indeed slightly higher than – the civilian labor force rates in Oregon between 2013 and 2017 for those 16 and older at 62.1% [10]. Also across the three cohorts, the great majority were able to secure employment within three months, and many within one month. Nevertheless, many Marshallese and Chuukese (around half) reported challenges in finding a job, some citing difficulties with language.

The Chuukese cohort held a variety of positions including caregiver, butcher, cashier, medical biller, train operator, ramp agent at PDX airport, technician, community health worker, and qualified interpreter. Likewise, the Marshallse cohort held varied positions such as caregiver, factory worker, food processor, and insurance agent. The Palauan cohort held positions including community health worker, custodian, groundskeeper, materials processor, security guard, loan officer, and radiologist. All three cohorts demonstrated higher rates in the labor force compared to their home countries (this can be due to a variety of factors); for the Chuukese cohort, 61% had no job in FSM whereas 27% had no job in Oregon. For the Marshallse cohort, 33% had no job in RMI whereas 25% had no job in Oregon. For the Palauan cohort, rates followed a similar pattern, with 53% having had no job in Palau and 12% reporting no job in Oregon. A few interviewees noted the expectation they felt to find and hold a job in the U.S., an expectation that was softer in their home country. Compared with their home countries, few held similar jobs. Respondent #18, who in Oregon worked in security (having received a law enforcement certificate in Oregon) and had previously worked as a police officer in RMI, commented on the differences, even within a similar line of work: “On the island, we did not have guns. We had fists, sticks, pepper spray.”

Reasons for not holding a job were varied (and often not recorded in the interview process), and included issues such as poor health and lack of transportation and childcare. For the Chuukese and Marshallse cohorts, childcare was cited as the largest reason for not working, followed by health issues and, for the Marshallse cohort, transportation challenges. For the 14 Chuukese without a job, caring for a family member was the foremost reason provided (57%) for not participating in the labor force. All but one who cited this reason were female, revealing a gender signal (it is not determined if this is a preferred choice or a barrier to participating in the labor force).

Across all three cohorts, the training received focused on job skills and primarily occurred through the place of employment. On the whole the purpose of training was to secure a position or to be promoted. Training was conducted largely in the workplace itself, with additional mentions of educational institutions, churches, the Red Cross, the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), and the Micronesian Islander Community (MIC). Respondent #12 noted that MIC offers training for a certificate of completion as a community health worker and qualified medical interpreter. She reported that IRCO (Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization) provides training via micro-finance grant money. Training is also available through COFA-CANN and the Asian Pacific Islander Coalition.

5.3. Climate Change

Of the Chuukese cohort, only 62% of respondents expressed awareness of the concept of “climate change,” though when effects were described (sea-level rise, intensity of droughts, fire, storms, etc.), respondents who believed climate change to be affecting FSM increased to 79%. Among the Marshallse cohort, 90% expressed awareness of the concept of “climate change” and 95% believed it to be affecting RMI. Similarly, 88% of Palauans were familiar with the concept and 94% believed it to be affecting Palau. This suggests that describing the

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9. The National Council on Interpreting in Health Care defines a “qualified interpreter” as “an individual who has been assessed for professional skills, demonstrates a high level of proficiency in at least two languages and has the appropriate training and experience to interpret with skill and accuracy while adhering to the National Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice published by the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care” [11].
effects in practical terms is essential to improving understanding of climate change. Respondent #42, a Marshallese man who was not familiar with the concept, was able to describe the effects in detail: “Big white sand of the land is gone, ocean is now covering it. The high school bus stop is covered now. It used to be one mile of land, and now is gone.” Only one interviewee (Respondent #2) who was familiar with the term did not believe it was affecting FSM: “I believe it’s part of God’s plan, creation.”

Many interviewees reported the effects either personally experienced or relayed from others. Effects are especially pronounced on the lower-lying outer islands. Respondent #10 (interviewed with her husband) described how the wind carries the salt water over the land, damaging the crops. Taro farms are “filled with salt water,” the husband explained. “When you pull it up, it’s rotten. Not like before.” Respondent #10 added, “The coconut is salty. Dad built a sea wall but now it’s gone.” Her husband volleyed, “A lake in the middle of one island is expanding. Even the island is shrinking. The trees are falling in the ocean. I’m worried.”

Respondent #22, who emigrated from an outer island in Chuuk in 2018, described the situation as “getting worse, lot of problem rising of the sea. Typhoon, tornado, and hard on breadfruit and taro. I do believe that the cause of the problem is the climate change.” Respondent #4, who last visited his parents on an outer island in Chuuk in 1999, recalled that even then, the differences between that visit and the visit ten years prior were evident: “I could see the difference from when I was little. The ocean rise big time.” Describing the flooding at high tide, he explained “This is not like before!”

A Chuukese woman from an outer island who last visited in 2005 (Respondent #13), reported the size of the island shrinking: “It feels like the island is getting smaller. The palm tree moved. It was in the middle of the island and now in the ocean. When I came here [Oregon] I learned about sea level rise. Maybe some people need to move on the smaller islands. Old people though can live and die there. It’s hard to leave.” Respondent #12 reported a similar situation of sea-level rise and destroyed taro crops. She heard talk of relocating people from the beach to higher ground, although was unsure whether it had happened yet. The government of Palau is reported to be addressing the issue. “We signed the Paris Agreement. We are very involved, protective.”

Of the Chuukese cohort, 15% reported climate change as a factor for relocating to Oregon and 18% cited it as a factor for not returning to FSM. Of the Marshallese cohort, 25% cited climate change a factor for relocating; only two respondents did not intend to return to RMI, and both indicated that climate change was a factor for not wanting to return. And of the Palauan cohort, only one indicated climate change to be a factor for relocating. However, among the eight who did not wish to return to Palau, 25% cited it as a factor.

As highlighted in Fig. 1, some COFA migrants in the U.S. do not plan to return. Respondent #24 lamented, “There is no place for us. The island is shrinking.” Others are unsure. Respondent #14 explained, “I want to go back and look. [Climate change] may be a factor now. I don’t know for sure as I did not get to explore when I went back in January.” Respondent #31 reported that climate change is the “biggest threat to the RMI community, there has to be something amazing for me to now want to return and live in the RMI again.” Indicative of the different perspectives, Respondent #42 held differing opinion on returning to the Marshall Islands: “It’s home. I still want to go back.”

This research shows that climate change is shown to be a growing concern for COFA migrants; and while not a primary driver, it does register as a factor for emigrating from the island nations as well as a reason for not returning. One way to consider one’s perception of climate change is through a religion signal. Participants were asked, “Do you believe climate change is affecting Micronesia?” Disaggregating responses by religious affiliation across the three cohorts reveals that Protestants from the sample populations are less likely to believe that climate change is affecting Micronesia than those who identify as Catholic or as unaffiliated.10 This is illustrated in Fig. 2.

10. It is important to note that the trend is not intended to be statistically generalizable. However, it offers a window for further research to explore the influence of religion on perceptions of climate change.
6. Challenges and Opportunities

6.1. Maintaining Employment and Breaking the Styrofoam Ceiling

Among the Chuukese cohort, 52% reported difficulty obtaining employment, with the top reason attributed to caring for a family member (cited by 57% of those who reported a challenge). Other reasons for not obtaining a job were poor health (21%) and being laid off (14%). Difficulties to maintaining a job were due to arriving to work on time (54%), regularly coming to work (46%), and other reasons (58%) including health concerns, cultural barriers, language barriers, and child responsibilities.\(^\text{11}\) The majority of Chuukese respondents (65%) cited that their lives in Oregon would be improved if they had more information on securing a job and job training.

Cultural issues were also cited as a contributor to not coming to work on a regular basis. Respondent #5 relayed the story of asking his employer for bereavement leave for the passing of his wife’s auntie. He had a document for her death and expected three days bereavement, but it was not accepted – his employer said that only immediate family qualify for bereavement leave. Commenting on the cultural differences, he observed, “In our culture, the family we are related to, if someone passes away, we help each other.” Perceived mistreatment in the workplace was mentioned by several respondents. “It’s so different,” reported Respondent #2. “Sometimes I don’t feel good about it. It’s difficult to express what is in here [pointing to heart].” Respondent #3 first indicated no challenges in the workplace, but upon further reflection divulged that some of his co-workers assumed he “didn’t know much” perhaps due to his race (the interviewee was careful not to make that assumption).

Likewise, among the Marshallse cohort, 50% reported difficulty obtaining employment; and many cited difficulties in maintaining a job, including arriving to work on time (60%), regularly coming to work (40%), and understanding directions from the supervisor (47%). Among the Palauan cohort (which demonstrated higher educational achievement), only 20% reported difficulty obtaining employment, with caring for family members and poor health as reasons given for not obtaining a job. Difficulties in maintaining a job were attributed to transportation and weather issues, especially during inclement weather, when public transportation was difficult to access.

For many in the workforce, there is limited opportunity for advancement, in what may be called the “styrofoam ceiling,” referring to the largely forgotten jobs in America’s fast-food restaurant industry [12]. Other common jobs performed among all three cohorts (women in particular) include housekeeping and assistants in nursing homes.\(^\text{12}\) At the same time, the workplace is a source for pride. Respondent #1 described her work in a nursing home as a “ministry” as she talks and prays with her patients. “Even though they forget things they are good at listening. They depend on us.” She felt valued and appreciated by her employer.

Workplace advancement is largely tied to educational achievement, as those with more desirable positions typically hold associate’s, bachelor’s, and even master’s degrees. Those with college training but without degrees also tend to have better employment prospects. As all three cohorts had low graduation rates among those who matriculated in college, bridging the gap between matriculation and degree completion constitutes an area for focusing. Financing for education is a major barrier, as well as possibly awareness of opportunities for financial support. Respondent #3 stated the challenge of funding his education: “Micronesians are not able to get federal loans” (although he was able to secure a work-study position).\(^\text{13}\)

The Palauan cohort cited more information on jobs and job training (47%), and life skills (47%) as the two most important ways to improve life upon arrival in Oregon. Access to higher education scholarships, grants, and the application process in general was also identified as an area needing additional support. Providing greater awareness of financing options as well as legislative advocacy for federal student aid can help bridge the gap and afford increased graduation rates, thereby providing greater opportunities to break the styrofoam ceiling.

6.2. Improving Quality of Life and Mitigating Culture Shock

For the Chuukese cohort, a large majority (84%) indicated they wish they had learned more about life in Oregon before emigrating, and a majority (65%) stated their lives in Oregon would be improved if they had more information on securing a job and job training. Suggestions for an improved quality of life included better assistance before leaving FSM with the top three needs reported as access to information about life in the U.S. (84%), life skills training (21%), and improved English ability (13%).

Among the 23 Chuukese who cited finding help/information as a challenge, language proficiency was markedly lower than for the overall cohort: 13 of the 15 who identified as having “limited” English noted this challenge. Respondent #23 explained, “[I] try to do things on my own but sometimes I get confused. My English is limited.” Culture was also an adjustment, even for some who have lived in Oregon many years. Respondent #39, who arrived in 1999, stated “Adjusting to the new environment, custom, culture everything

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\(^{11}\) Recorded among those who were employed and cited challenges; as multiple responses could be given, totals may be greater than 100%.

\(^{12}\) Journalists Roche and Mariano reported in a series on indentured servitude for the Baltimore Sun and Orlando Sentinel in September 2002 on recruiting outfits who specifically targeted Micronesians to fill these positions under misleading promises and forced legal contracts. Following renegotiation of the Compact in 2003, the FSM and RMI governments took steps to “regulate the so-called body-brokers” [13].

\(^{13}\) The Federal Student Aid Office of the U.S. Department of Education provides an exception for citizens of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau, who “may be eligible for only certain types of federal student aid”: students from Palau are eligible for Federal Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and Federal Work-Study. Citizens from FSM and RMI are eligible for only Federal Pell Grants [14].
is new to me. New lifestyle. I am trying to adjust.” Respondent #10 explained her experience of acclimating to a new place: “Even though I knew English, I didn’t know my way around. I asked questions and my husband has a relative working as a case worker who helps out.”

Respondent #2 cited that better preparation could have alleviated her “culture shock.” This was partly tied to education, which she stated in Chuuk was “very low.” She saw educational opportunities as a primary reason for parents to send their children to the U.S., suggesting that parents had the expectation their children would return home following their education. However, when asked about job opportunities in Chuuk, she stated there were “not many good jobs” except in the government or private business ownership. Respondent #3 observed “There is no subsistence living here [the U.S.]. It may be a shock for some to have to work here.” Respondent #10 revealed that ego can exacerbate challenges, citing the struggle some in her community have in keeping appointments: “They don’t call to reschedule.” She gave the example of a pregnant woman (unnamed) as waiting until a month before giving birth before getting help – citing concern about paying. “They are afraid to ask questions and wait until they have to go to the ER.”

Unfamiliarity with life in the U.S. traversed both social decorum and legal awareness. “It’s a huge jump,” described Respondent #3. “I was raised somewhere where you feel secure on the other side of the road or up the hill. They are Chuukese. My kids [in the U.S.] live in a different world. Parents struggle with how they will lay out the rules.” Childrearing in the U.S. is challenging as parents themselves are navigating an unfamiliar culture. Respondent #4 cited the cultural differences regarding the law: In the U.S., newcomers may drink in public and cause trouble. In FSM, they can apologize and then “forget it,” but in the U.S. there are legal repercussions. Respondent #4 recommended that newcomers have a short training (or video) about the laws.

Changes in state law have addressed some challenges, most notably for renewing driver licenses. Previously, driver licenses needed to be renewed every year in Oregon; now it is every eight years. Citing difficulty in renewing his driver license and the repercussions of having an expired license, Respondent #18 reported that “Before the Oregon driver’s license bill passed, most employers would look at me suspiciously.” However, replacing a lost Form I-94, the Arrival-Departure Record Card, appears to still be challenging. The Form I-94 is necessary to apply for a job; replacing a missing form was especially burdensome. Respondent #4 recalled how some who lost their form traveled to the U.S.–Mexico border to obtain a replacement.

Language is a common challenge. Respondent #13, who emigrated in 1985, said she “knew nothing” when she first arrived. “I still don’t know how to use a computer,” she confided. Even though she attended an English immersion high school, she described her level upon her arrival in the U.S. as only conversational. Several interviewees suggested greater use of interpreters as a solution. Opportunities for improved English language skills appear to be increasing in Chuuk. Respondent #6 reported that “There are some Americans that help in teaching English. So it’s getting better. They are teaching in high school, college. This started around 2010.” Still, language adeptness is a common concern. She revealed, “I’m always concerned about my language. I always ask my younger sister to help [communicate]. If I have a job interview or orientation, the whole night I am thinking, what to say. It’s always the language.” Sometimes the nuances of the language have repercussions. For instance, Respondent #10 stated that some did not qualify for housing because they listed extended members as “family” who would occupy the unit: “They need to know not just the rights but how to fill out forms properly.”

Respondent #14 described being unprepared upon his arrival to Oregon in 2004: “I learned my way around by asking family and friends. The year before I graduate high school, we were told to apply for college. I did not know about scholarships or how to get into college. When I arrived, I had a hard time finding a place to live. I did not have clothes. I was supposed to attend Eastern Oregon University, but it was snowing and it was too cold and I did not want to live or go to school there. There was no support for me, but today, it seems many people have the support and are better.” Offering an example, Respondent #22 referred to resources such as the COFA Premium Assistance Program, which “helps me to go see the doctor.” The church can play a role too, with Respondent #5 providing an example of an Oregon Chuukese church board providing an advance on rent with the understanding that the borrower would repay once able. As the overseas Chuukese population has grown, so has the support network, both at home and abroad.

As noted by many respondents, relatives are seen to play an important role in bridging the gap. Respondent #57, a young woman, acknowledged, “I depend on my aunt a lot to do almost everything for me.” Assistance is provided both from young to old and old to young. Respondent #4 offered that the family culture provided all the needed support: “We interact with each other. If we are short on rent, we call up family. We help each other. This goes back to the old ways. Each clan has a chief, social structure. Today that is disappearing [in Chuuk].” He then added, “disappearing on the main island, more Western style.”

Increased opportunities for training was suggested, as well as a shift in defining success. Respondent #11, a college student, described how motivation leads to success: “A lot [of Micronesians] go into factories and don’t find opportunities. To me you just go find opportunities. A lot don’t recognize their capabilities and resort to factories or fast food places. My parents pushed me to go to school. We worked hard for it. My scholarship is a full ride. I found out about the scholarship from my public high school. A lot of Chuukese don’t dream big.” She suggested Micronesian mentors to share stories with the youth: “The problem is motivation. Tuition is free at community college. But they resort to work and don’t think
bigger. Get Micronesians together to motivate others."

Among the Marshallese cohort, top opportunities cited for improving one’s experience in Oregon included more information on jobs and job training (75%), life skills training (70%), having more information about life in the U.S. (70%), legal aid (65%), and English language skills (65%). Respondent #17 stated that “everything” would have improved her situation. “Time is not island time here in the U.S. We learned racism, prejudice, and not aware. Here, we learned everything.” The need for learning financial skills was particularly noted as it is indicative of broader differences between the nations. Respondent #18 noted, “In the islands, I lived free. No bills, no need to worry.” Other responses included the need for improved understanding of American laws and social norms as a way to better integrate into the community and the need for increased educational opportunities.

Many Marshallese cited the advanced educational system in Oregon as a shock – seen as both a challenge and opportunity. Respondent #16 recalled the stress of keeping up with homework and the inflexibility to accommodate for life events. There was also some confusion about recognition of certificates and degrees in the U.S. For instance, Respondent #46 was unsure if her associate degree from RMI would be recognized in Oregon. Similarly, the Palauan cohort cited having more information about life in the U.S. as the top indicator for an improved quality of life in the U.S. Financial literacy was noted as well, as Respondent #12 described having to ask a bank teller how to balance her account.

In all three cohorts, challenges were identified across all facets of daily life, from understanding the law, financial documents, and local customs to finding legal help to navigating public transportation. Accessing transportation was the most often-cited challenge among the Palauan cohort. Friends, family, and roommates with vehicles often lent support. Respondent #79 explained the situation: “I rely on public transportation (bus), taxi, or vehicles often lent support. Respondent #79 explained the situation: “I rely on public transportation (bus), taxi, or friends of my mom to get to places I need to go. Otherwise, I stay home.” Nevertheless, all three cohorts reported high quality of life scores, with 97% of Chuukese, 95% of Marshallese, 95% of Palauans reporting either as expected or better than expected life quality in Oregon.

### 6.3. Facing Discrimination

Woven among responses from all three cohorts were suggestions and direct instances of discrimination and mistreatment. Respondent #14 noted discrimination faced at work by “customers, police, especially white people who think I am Mexican.” Respondent #3 recalled discrimination faced in both Hawai’i and Oregon: “What Mexicans get, I get.” Recalling his time in Hawai’i in particular, “they assume you [Micronesians] are uneducated, trouble.” Respondent #3 was hesitant to label her experience as discriminatory; however, at work she felt she was being taken advantage of: “I feel that at work, employers think I’m stupid.” She often worked six hours straight with no break (if there are no other employees, she does not get a break). She recognized the unfairness, though still placed accountability upon herself: “Maybe I need to speak up more.” She reflected that she had been limited by her level of education and regretted not continuing her schooling. Respondent #2 felt “not equal” at her job and disrespected by co-workers: “I feel I’m inferior. I’m afraid I’m not doing well with my job.” However, she also acknowledged that her workplace helped her a lot.

In addition to the workplace, discrimination was perceived in the neighborhood. Respondent #10 relayed how her young daughter’s friend told her daughter, “My parents said we can’t play because you have black color.” Other forms of discrimination are more subtle. She provided an illustrative example regarding an interaction with her property manager. “We like to leave our slippers outside. The manager gave us a note that we have to take slippers off the patio. We don’t want our floor to be dirty.” Respondent #12, a Palauan woman, explained, “The number one [issue] I experienced in Oregon is discrimination. It doesn’t just come from the white folks. They think with the accent that I’m Mexican.” Upon further reflection, she then tempered her viewpoint: “Oregon is open-minded, up to a certain level.”

### 7. Building Capacity

Interview data revealed specific challenges in the transition of Micronesians to the U.S., with many COFA migrants to the U.S. demonstrating insufficient preparation. Contextualized to the Pacific Northwest, the diffused geography of Pacific Islander migrants and the limited centralized support present a unique regional context. Table 3 suggests opportunities for capacity building and considerations for further action.

### 8. Conclusions

Among the three COFA-community cohorts, semi-structured interviews emphasized key findings in interviewees’ transition to life in Oregon and employment barriers and facilitators, along with an undercurrent of climate-change drivers for both emigrating to the U.S. and choosing to remain. Three notable themes emerged: 1) The transition to life in the U.S. is experienced differently across and within the three selected populations; 2) migrants wish to be better equipped with job and life skills training; 3) climate change is a contributing factor for some who are intending to emigrate and for some who are not intending to return after migration. Given projected continued net Micronesian migration [15] and favorable international relationships, migration to the U.S. will continue to be an essential element of Micronesian states’ strategies and will warrant continued discussion to create beneficial experiences for all.
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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Action</th>
<th>Potential outcome</th>
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<td>Education advocacy</td>
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<td>Employees will gain a more reliable employee and employees will better meet expectations in the workplace.</td>
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<td>Partnerships</td>
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**Acknowledgements**

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**References:**


**Table 3. Action items for capacity building.**

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**Academic Societies & Scientific Organizations:**
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- Oregon Public Health Association (OPHA)
- National Association of Community Health Workers (NACHW)

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**Selected Publications:**

**Academic Societies & Scientific Organizations:**
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- International Water Resources Association (IWRA), Secretary-General, Treasurer, and Director
- Environmental Peacebuilding Association (EnPAx), President

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