A quartet of graduate students from one of the nation’s top universities is teaming up with a Dubuque organization to analyze how COVID-19 will impact the local immigrant workforce.

The four students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are researching how the novel coronavirus is changing the relationship between immigrants and local employers, an issue that already was fraught with complexity.

Alex Baum, knowledge management director for Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, believes the topic is a crucial one to explore.

“(Area immigrants) are some of the most vulnerable people right now,” he said. “Some don’t speak fluent English and that makes it difficult to get that health information (about COVID-19). They also don’t have the same access to services such as health care.”

The students will wrap up their analysis in the next two months and findings could be released as early as May, Baum said. The student-driven study is part of a broader immigrant-needs assessment that is being conducted by foundation this year.

The local immigrant population is widely viewed as an untapped resource for businesses. But employers often need to navigate complex immigration laws and overcome communication barriers to make those hires.

Sade Nabahe is one of the four MIT students contributing to the study. She said she feels a personal connection to the project, noting that her mother immigrated to the U.S.

“Growing up, I have seen the difficulties immigrants have faced getting into the job market,” she said.

Initially, members of the MIT group planned to arrive in Dubuque in mid-March and remain in town for about 12 days, conducting a series of in-person interviews during their stay. The severity of America’s COVID-19 crisis became apparent just days before the group’s planned departure, derailing the travel plans and forcing members to conduct all interviews with area sources over the phone.

MIT student Nathan Arnosti noted that they also had to fundamentally alter the focus of their project, which initially was focused more generally on employer-immigrant relations.

“We knew we had to pivot because there was no other way to do our research,” he said. “The assumptions about how the economy was going weren’t even true anymore. (Prior to COVID-19), Dubuque was a place with low unemployment and trouble finding workers.”

Baum said the overall immigrant-needs assessment will draw from interviews with local companies, area immigrants and service organizations that work with the local immigrant population. The report will map out the existing services for immigrants, outline needs and identify best practices.

Baum looks forward to releasing the study next year.

“I think everyone right now is looking at the immediate crisis and trying to put out fires,” said Baum. “I think with this study we can look at how to build the recovery.”