Educator Brief

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Series
IMMIGRATION INITIATIVE

Recognizing Immigrant-Origin Students in Higher Education

By Carola Suárez-Orozco

Immigrant-origin students are a growing and yet often unrecognized presence in higher education.[1] While institutions of higher education have rightly become attentive to their "first-generation" and racial-ethnic minority students, they tend to overlook their ***fastest growing*** population of students—immigrant-origin students. Recent data based upon the U.S. Census and jointly released by the Migration Policy Institute and the President's Alliance reveals that **31% of all students enrolled in higher education are of immigrant origin**.[2] And, while enrollment for students from U.S.-born families has been declining, students who have immigrant parents account for 80% of the increase in higher education enrollment over the last two decades. As immigrant-origin students bolster faltering enrollments for

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colleges and universities in a growing number of states, what should we know about their complex identities and how to best serve them?

WHO ARE IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS?

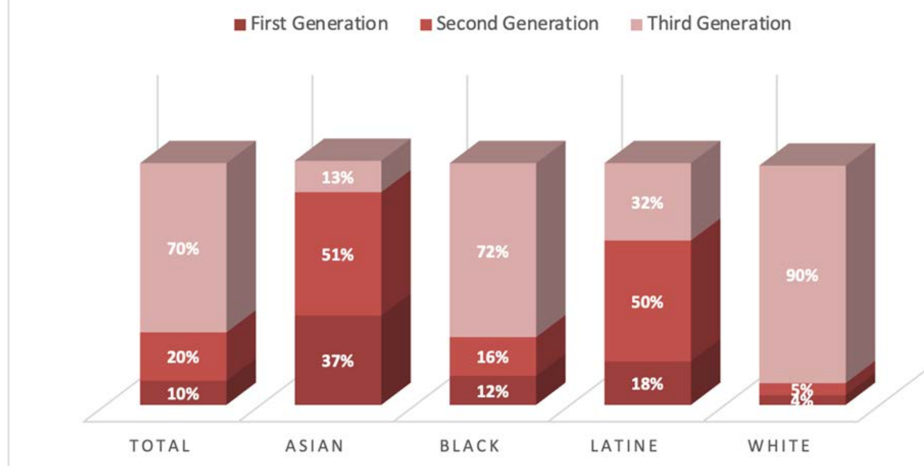
- Immigrant- origin students are part of the ***domestic student*** population in the United States and include both **first generation immigrants** (who were born abroad) and **second-generation** immigrants (born in the U.S. to one or more immigrant parents).

- Immigrant-origin students are **distinct from the nearly 1 million international students,**[3] who are foreign-born and enrolled in coursework at accredited, degree-granting higher education institutions in the United States on a temporary, non-immigrant visa (usually an F1 visa) that allows for academic study.[4]

- Today, there are **5.6 million immigrant-origin students** who have grown up in immigrant families in the U.S.. **3.8 million (62%) are U.S. born** (second-generation) while another **1.9 million (38%) are foreign born** (first-generation); these students are enrolled for all or for a significant portion of their educational experience in U.S. schools.[5]

- Among the first-generation, 44% are nationalized citizens while **56% hold a complex array of immigration and legal statuses** including legal permanent residency, refugee status, temporary asylum status, dependents of temporary visa holders, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA), as well as undocumented status.[6]

- Together, these first- and second-generation immigrant-origin students account for a significant percentage of higher education enrollment in a growing number of states [7]:



*Data Source, MPI analysis of U.S. 2021 Census data—CPS October Supplement 2021

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- 54% of all students in higher education in California are of immigrant-origin as is the case for 47% in New York state, 45% in Florida, and 44% in New Jersey. They make up between 32% to 39% in another 9 states – Nevada, Texas, Arizona, Illinois, Hawaii, Washington, Massachusetts, Connecticut, & Maryland.[8]

WHY IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS MAY HAVE BEEN INVISIBLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Several reasons may account for the invisibility of immigrant-origin students in higher education to date. One is the way in which data are kept.[9] While most institutions of higher education ask about racial-ethnic background and parental education, most do not ask about family or student immigrant origins. While scholars of immigration (e.g., the Migration Policy Institute) examine U.S. Census data for prevalence rates, higher education has not made identifying immigrant origin a focus. Within higher education circles for domestic students, data and analysis has tightly focused on race and ethnicity as well as first generation to attend college students. Notably, immigrant-origin students often overlap in these domains, but their immigrant-origin experience is lost by reducing them to either of these categories. Typically, second-generation immigrant students are entirely lost in the data and first-generation students may be confounded with another recognized student groups—international students. More recently, undocumented and students with DACA have come to attention. While they are an important and highly underserved population, they constitute a fraction of the immigrant-origin student population in higher education.

UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTING IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS EXPERIENCES & IDENTITIES

Immigrant-origins students are a highly diverse population who share experiences with other underserved populations including

racial -ethnic minoritized and first-generation students. Because of their families' recent migratory experiences, they also typically share some experiences that come with migration. And still others undergo very specific challenges rooted in their own structural situations (e.g., liminal immigration statuses or refugee backgrounds). It is incumbent on those of us who serve these students to understand these complexities.

Overlapping Experiences with other Underserved Populations

Immigrant-origin students, by virtue of the fact that their families typically hail from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, or Africa, ***belong to racial-ethnic minority categories*** within the U.S. context. As a result, immigrant-origin students play a significant role in the rapid diversification of our campuses. Eighty-eight percent of Asian, 68% of Latine, and 28% of Black students on campuses having immigrant families.

As immigrant-origin students enter the U.S. context they often become "minoritized." That is, premigration living in Asia or Latin American countries, they do not think of themselves in reference to the U.S. racial categories. However, once the migrate to the U.S., they become part of its pan racial-ethnic regime. As a Chinese student once put it to me, "Before I migrated I was Chinese—here I am Asian." For the first-generation, this is a new experience that must be navigated and children growing up in immigrant households must do so without the benefit of parental racial socialization relevant to the U.S. social context.[10] Such experiences of racialization are often further compounded by xenophobia as students who experience negative social interactions are left wondering whether to attribute such experiences to colorism, racism, linguicism, xenophobia, or some combination of other exclusionary biases.

First-generation students are college students whose parents have not graduated from college.[11] Institutions of higher education have increasingly come to recognize that these students face several specific challenges and allocate resources to better support their needs. While first-generation students demonstrate tenacity and work ethic, these students do not have the navigational social capital advantage that their peers with parents with college degrees have both in college access as well as post-graduation career pathways. First-generation students are more likely to be students of color and to have much lower annual median parental incomes than their non-first-generation peers ($41K vs. $90K).[12] They also frequently enter college through two-year institutions, work part-time, and are more likely to have dependents than their non-first-generation peers.

Immigrant-origin students are often first-generation to college students. Further, even when their parents are college educated, the parental higher education was often within an international context where some of the strategies of engagement (e.g., college entry, financial aid) may be quite different from U.S. practices. Immigrant-origin students, like first-generation students, typically attend public colleges and commonly enter the college system through community colleges.[13] They do so for a variety of reasons including cost-effectiveness, proximity to family, less than optimal high school preparation, and, for the first-generation, the opportunity to focus on English language skills development.[14]

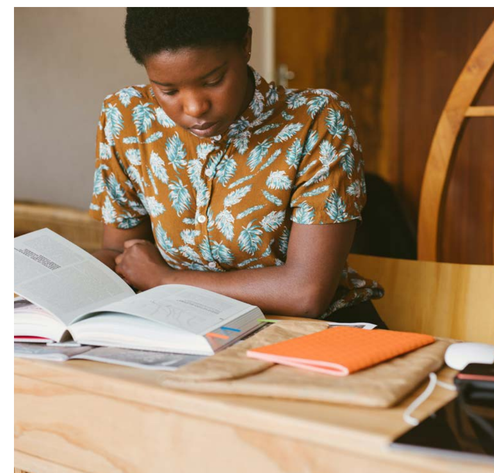
Shared Immigrant Experiences

All immigrant origin students share immigrant family origins—their parents and caregivers have undergone often-stressful migratory journeys with all the possibilities and challenges such processes presents. First-generation students have also undergone migration while the second-generation knows of this process through witnessing and internalizing family narratives of challenges, traumas and triumphs. For children of immigrants, migration shapes family dynamics and aspirations in a variety of ways including managing losses of relationships and family separations, negotiating acculturation, holding hybrid identities, and forging pathways to belonging, among many other complex facets. For many immigrant-origin students, a language other than English is spoken at home.

For the first-generation, this means that sometime during their childhood they were thrust into a new educational context while learning a second (and sometimes third) language to access educational content. For the second-generation this sometimes happens as they enter kindergarten. Students designated as English Learners, depending upon the schools they attend and the services available, can end up on less than rigorous academic tracks and are often playing academic catch-up.[15] Nonetheless, as students growing up in immigrant families often acquire English skills more quickly than their parents, they take on translation tasks that have been shown to foster cognitive, psych-social, and workplace skills.[16] Further, a sense of familial responsibility often carries on beyond childhood as immigrant-origin-students often juggle family obligations as they pursue their higher education.[17] While this can be distracting and may slow down their academic progress it can also drive their determination to be successful. Immigrant-origin students are also likely to pursue academic pathways that "give back" to their communities as part of a sense of social responsibility (e.g., teaching, nursing, counseling).[18]

Experiences Specific to Particular Groups

Two specific immigrant-origin groups bear particular attention—students with liminal documentation statuses and refugee students.



Liminal Statuses including DACA/TPS/ Undocumented Students

While the second-generation are by birthright citizens, a swath of first-generation students are navigating liminal statuses that subject them to fewer educational funding opportunities as well as uncertainty about the future. An estimated 56% of first-generation immigrant-origin students are non-citizens. While some have the benefit of legal permanent residency, others are asylum seekers, dependents of temporary visa holders, recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or undocumented.[19]

Over the last three decades, Congress and the Senate have been deadlocked in bringing about immigration reform. Today, generations of young people who arrived as young children without documentation are entering the higher education system. These students have been educated in the U.S. K-12 system (as ensured by the Pyer v. Doe Supreme Court decision) and now are estimated to account for roughly 1 in 50 college students.[20] These students face many challenges beginning with a steep fiscal penalty they face as they enter higher education.[21] They have no access to federal financial aid.[22] In many states, undocumented students are charged out of state tuition rates and have no access to state financial aid.[23] Twenty-three states as well as the District of Columbia do allow in-state tuition to their undocumented students and 17 of these states also provide access to state financial aid.[24]

Notably, several states provide access to in-state tuition only for DACA recipients.[25] Today, however, ***most students entering our higher education institutions are no longer eligible for DACA*** given that new applications have been blocked by legal challenges in the courts since 2017. While 141,000 (or 0.7% of all college students) are DACA eligible, 409,000 (or 1.9% of students) are undocumented.[26] Many campuses, however, still think of this group of students as having the protections of DACA. These students do not have access in many states to federal and state financial aid options, and they also live with deeply rooted concerns regarding life and work options post-graduation.

Further, undocumented students live with Chronic uncertainty about the future affects their lived realities, particularly uncertainty/ worry around their future options as well as the potential for the deportation of themselves or their family members well as their family members.[28] Their financial realities typically require that they work under the table to pay for their education and basic living expenses as well as to help support their families.[29] They are typically (though not always) the first generation to college but on many campuses, they are invisible and provided only minimal or erratic supports. [30] Complicating their realities are the hostile social and media representations of undocumented populations which results in patterns of social exclusion.[31] It should be also be noted that a state-wide system study conducted in California revealed that citizen students of mixed-status families (where a parent or caretaker was unauthorized) face very similar challenges and concerns navigating college as their undocumented counterparts.[32]

Refugee Students

As conflicts, environmental catastrophes, and other pressures and uncertainties continue to develop globally, displaced persons, asylum seekers, and refugees are a growing population increasingly in the news and public imaginary. These students share many of the challenges of their first-generation immigrant peers and in addition these students have navigated extraordinary traumas, displacements, and educational uncertainties and barriers. Notably, however, only 6% of refugee students around the world access higher education.[33] For a host of reasons beginning with interrupted and erratic educational experiences and liminal residencies, displaced persons are much less likely to access higher education. Recently the UNHCR has called for a "15by30 target" – to increase the enrollment of refugee students in higher education to 15% by 2030.[34] In January 2023, the Biden administration announced the launch of private sponsorship of refugees through Welcome Corps.[35]

As a result, and in the coming year, public and private colleges and universities will have opportunities to sponsor refugee students, who will be able to come who will be able to come to the U.S. as refugees with a pathway to citizenship and as entering students. As such, institutions may be seeing a marginal growing enrollment of refugee students in coming years.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

- Begin by **recognizing and acknowledging the presence** and immense potential of immigrant-origin students across campuses. Many campuses have become ***immigrant-student serving campuses*** and are likely to continue to be so in the coming years. These students are sustaining campuses that would otherwise be experiencing serious declines in college enrollments.[36]
- **Collect data on immigrant-origin first and second-generation status/identity** as part of the routine demographic data collection. This will enable the disaggregation of data and the tailoring of services to their experience.
- **Recognize immigrant-origin student diversity**. These students overlap with many categories that colleges and universities are serving (i.e., first-generation students, Latine, Asian, Black) but they are also distinct and too often invisible.
- Recognize that they have ***complex intersecting needs*** that should be served.
- Recognize these students' **exceptional resilience and resourcefulness**. Many have overcome extraordinary barriers to reach higher education and juggle many challenges as they navigate their higher educational experiences.
- **Provide training** to college counselors, administrators, educators, and the community about this vibrant and growing student population.
- **Foster spaces of belonging and inclusion** that recognize and embrace immigrant-origin students in all their complexity.

Successfully completing higher education has both individual and societal benefits.[37] By taking such steps, immigrant-origin students

will have better educational experiences and outcomes. Further, campuses will more likely augment their retention and success rates for these students. Given the magnitude of this student population, their success has deep implication for our national wellbeing as well as a thriving social fabric.

ENDNOTES

1. Batalova, J., & Feldblum, M. (2023). Investing in the Future: Higher Education Should Focus to Immigrant-Origin Student Population. President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration.
2. Batalova, J. & Fix, M. (2023). Shared Gains: Immigrant Origin Students in U.S. Colleges. Migration Policy Institute.
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23. Suárez-Orozco, C., et al. (2015). Undocumented undergraduates on college campuses: Understanding their challenges and assets and what it takes to make an UndocuFriendly campus. Harvard Educational Review, 85(3), 427-463.
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LEARN MORE

- ☐ **Batalova, J., & Feldblum, M. (2023).** **Investing in the Future: Higher Education Should Focus to Immigrant-Origin Student Population. President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration.**
- ☐ **Batalova, J. & Fix, M. (2023). Shared Gains: Immigrant Origin Students in U.S. Colleges. Migration Policy Institute.**
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- ☐ **Higher Ed Immigration Portal (2023)– Interactive resource – state by state breakdown of numbers of 1st & 2nd generation immigrant, undocumented, & international students, and in- state tuition equity and licensure access for undocumented and refugee students.**
- ☐ **Kim, E. & Díaz, J. (2013). Immigrant students and higher education: ASHE higher education report 38:6. John Wiley & Sons.**
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About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.