

# Opening the Door to the American Dream: Increasing Higher Education Access and Success for Immigrants

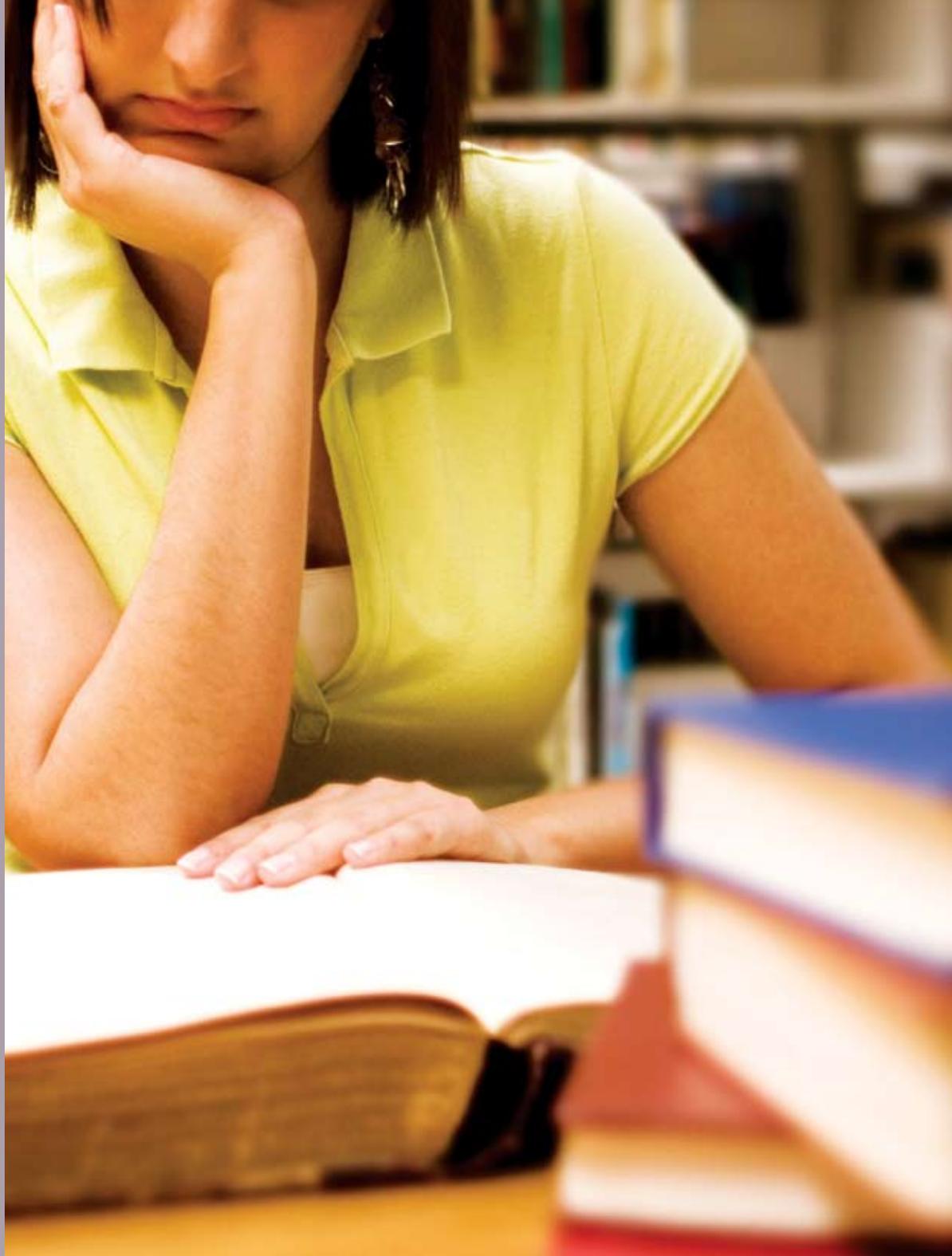
BY WENDY ERISMAN, PH.D., AND SHANNON LOONEY

April 2007

A REPORT BY  
Institute for Higher  
Education Policy

SUPPORTED BY  
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Access and Success  
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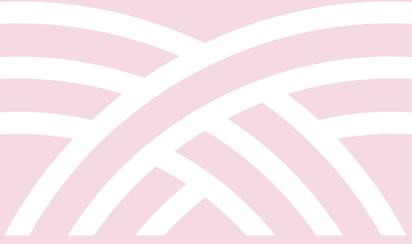
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# Executive Summary

The United States of America has always been a nation of immigrants—a land of opportunity where newcomers can, through hard work and perseverance, achieve better lives for themselves and their families. But in today's world, realizing the American Dream is now almost impossible without at least some college education, and many immigrants face significant barriers to gaining access to and succeeding in higher education. Higher education for immigrants isn't an issue narrowly focused on the well-being of these immigrants as individuals but has major implications for the nation as whole. As the United States moves into the 21st century as part of a global economy in which postsecondary education is a key to economic competitiveness, it is imperative to develop policies at the federal, state, local, and institutional levels to help immigrants gain access to and succeed in higher education. Without such policies, the nation may find itself with a workforce that does not have sufficient education to enable the United States to remain economically competitive.

This report describes the demographic and educational characteristics of the U.S. immigrant population and discusses barriers faced by legal immigrants seeking to enroll in postsecondary education. The report focuses on older immigrants, who confront significant challenges in understanding and gaining access to the U.S. system of higher education because they did not attend American primary and secondary schools. It also examines the characteristics of and the barriers to persistence and completion faced by immigrant students who do enroll in college—a group that makes up 12 percent of the U.S. undergraduate population but has received relatively little attention in the public policy arena.

## **Immigrant groups vary considerably in their access to and success in higher education.**

- Immigrants generally have lower educational attainment than the American population as a whole, but some immigrant groups have higher levels of education than others.
- Immigrants age 25 and older who are not U.S. citizens have lower levels of educational attainment. Almost two-thirds of these immigrants have no more than a high school education. Naturalized citizens, on the other hand, are more likely than the overall U.S. population to have completed a bachelor's degree or higher.

- Educational attainment among immigrants varies widely by region of origin, with immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean having the least education. Three-quarters of immigrants from this region have never attended college, and almost half have not graduated from high school. Immigrants from Africa and Asia are the best-educated immigrant groups; nearly half of these immigrants hold bachelor's degrees or higher.
- Age at the time of immigration plays an important role in educational attainment. Immigrants who enter the country between the ages of 13 and 19 achieve the lowest levels of education, while those who arrive as children have educational levels that compare favorably with those of their native-born peers. Age at time of immigration is also related to region of origin. For example, Latin American countries send the highest percentages of teenage and young adult immigrants, while Asian countries send the highest percentages of older adults.

**Although immigrants face challenges in gaining access to higher education, they make up a significant portion of American undergraduates.**

- Among young adult immigrants age 18–24, high school graduation and college enrollment rates are lower than for their native-born peers, although these rates vary by region of origin and age at the time of immigration. For example, less than 15 percent of Latin American immigrants in this age group were attending college in 2005, compared with more than half of young adult immigrants from Africa and Asia.
- In 2003–04, immigrants made up 12 percent of undergraduate college students—a percentage that makes this group comparable in numbers to Hispanic students, Black students, and students with disabilities.

**Immigrant undergraduates differ from their native-born counterparts in a number of important ways.**

- Many immigrant college students are non-traditional students who have delayed entry into higher education after high school, who attend college part-time, and who may have dependents of their own.
- Immigrant students have higher unmet financial need than the average undergraduate and are more likely to enroll in community colleges or private for-profit institutions—55 percent of all immigrant undergraduates and 59 percent of legal permanent residents were enrolled in these types of institutions in 2003–04.
- While immigrant undergraduates complete college at the same rate as the overall student population, they are likely to earn certificates or associate's degrees rather than bachelor's degrees. Among students who began college in 1995, only 23 percent of all immigrant students and 19 percent of permanent residents had earned a bachelor's degree by 2001, compared with 30 percent of all undergraduates.

**Immigrant college students also vary considerably by race and ethnicity.**

- Asian immigrant undergraduates are more likely than other racial or ethnic groups to be dependent students, and their parents' educational attainment and incomes are higher than those of any group except for White immigrants. Asian and White immigrants are also more likely than other groups to earn bachelor's degrees, although income plays an important role in bachelor's degree attainment for these groups, as well, with higher income students more likely to complete a degree.

- Black immigrant undergraduates are especially likely to be non-traditional students; many students in this group are older than traditional college students and support dependents. In 2003-04, almost three-quarters of Black immigrant undergraduates were independent students, and 43 percent were age 30 or older. Black immigrant students are most likely to earn certificates or associate's degrees.
- Latino immigrants are particularly underrepresented in higher education, comprising only 30 percent of immigrant undergraduate students, although Hispanics make up 47 percent of the overall immigrant population. Hispanic immigrants have the highest high school and undergraduate drop-out rates of any immigrant group and low rates of bachelor's degree attainment, suggesting that this ethnic group faces particular challenges in gaining access to and succeeding in higher education.

### **Immigrants face multiple barriers in gaining access to higher education and completing a college degree.**

- **Lack of information about postsecondary education.** Lack of information about college admissions and financial aid processes can be a formidable barrier for immigrants who wish to attend college. Immigrant high school students who are not enrolled in the college preparatory academic track—including many English as a Second Language (ESL) students—may not receive adequate college counseling, and access to information about higher education is even more inaccessible to adult immigrants who wish to attend college.
- **Work and family responsibilities.** Immigrant college students, while highly motivated academically, spend more time than their native-born peers on family responsibilities, and these responsibilities make it more difficult for them to succeed in school. More than half of immigrant college students are age 24 or older, one-third have dependents, and almost three-quarters work full- or part-time while attending school, suggesting that they face significant demands from work and family.
- **Financial need.** Students from low-income families often find it hard to afford the expenses and forgone earnings associated with pursuing a college education, and immigrant families are considerably more likely than the general population to be living in poverty. More than a third of Latin American immigrants, for example, earn incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty level. The low-income status of many immigrants may be compounded by the need to send remittances back to their countries of origin.
- **Academic preparation and achievement.** Educational systems vary greatly in terms of the material taught and the instructional methods used. Some immigrants may find that they are not adequately prepared for college-level work in the United States, even if they have graduated from high school or previously attended college, while others may find that they have to repeat courses that were considered secondary level in their own countries. Moreover, in recent years, an increasing number of teenage immigrants have been arriving in the United States with little formal schooling and with literacy levels, even in their native languages, below their grade level.

- **Limited English proficiency.** Limited English proficiency is a primary barrier that prevents immigrant students from graduating from high school and moving into postsecondary education, especially immigrant students who come to America as teenagers and have only a few years to learn English. Limited English proficiency may also be a concern for older immigrants who wish to attend college because they are more likely than young immigrants to speak a language other than English. Among immigrants age 24 and older, for example, 18 percent reported that they spoke no English or did not speak English well, compared with only 5 percent of immigrants age 18–23.

**Public policy that addresses higher education access for immigrants must take into account the differences among immigrant groups.**

- There is no one way to overcome the barriers immigrants face in gaining access to higher education in the United States. Most policies that address this challenging issue are going to have to be localized, narrow in focus, and targeted toward specific immigrant groups to ensure that efforts reach those who most need assistance.
- Immigrants vary considerably in their access to and success in postsecondary education, especially with regard to region of origin and age at the time of immigration. Policies and programs tailored to the needs of Latino immigrants and immigrants who come to America as teenagers are essential if these groups are to gain access to the benefits of higher education. Such policies and programs might include targeted outreach to the Latino community to emphasize the importance of postsecondary education and the availability of financial

aid and expanded and retooled high school ESL programs that would enable teenage immigrants to learn English while still pursuing a college preparatory academic track.

- Many of the barriers immigrants confront are similar to the ones generally faced by low-income and first-generation college students in the United States, and policies intended to benefit that population as a whole will also help immigrants. These include adequate investment in higher education grant aid and support programs such as TRIO and increased efforts to broaden public awareness of the steps traditional-age students need to take to be prepared for college.
- However, certain barriers have a greater impact on immigrants, regardless of their background and resources. The most obvious of these are limited English proficiency and difficulties in integrating into American society. Developing a broader and more efficient path to citizenship and offering accessible and affordable programs to help immigrants learn English and become familiar with their new country would open the doors to higher education for many immigrants.

The policy and program ideas suggested in this report are only a small step in what is likely to be a long and complicated process, but it is a process that must be started. We have succeeded, with past waves of immigrants, in providing the chance for social and economic advancement. As we move into the 21st century, it is increasingly obvious that social mobility requires access to postsecondary education. Increasing access to higher education for immigrants, then, is a necessity if the United States is to remain a land of opportunity for those who come here in search of a better life. ☞

# Introduction

For hundreds of years, immigrants have come to the United States in pursuit of freedom and prosperity. These new residents believe that, through hard work and perseverance, they can achieve better lives for themselves and their families. But in today's world, realizing the American Dream is now almost impossible without some postsecondary education. At the same time, many immigrants face significant barriers in gaining access to and succeeding in higher education. These prospective and current college students must struggle with limited finances, work and family responsibilities, varied academic backgrounds, limited English proficiency, and a lack of knowledge about the American system of higher education—all of which can affect their ability to navigate the complex postsecondary admissions and financial aid processes, and the equally challenging process of earning a postsecondary credential.

Higher education for immigrants isn't an issue narrowly focused on the well-being of these immigrants as individuals but has major implications for the nation as whole. As America moves into the 21st century as part of a global economy in which postsecondary education is a key to economic competitiveness, it is imperative to develop policies at the federal, state, local, and institutional levels to help immigrants gain access to and succeed in higher education. Without such policies, the nation may find itself with a workforce that does not have sufficient education to enable the United States to remain economically competitive. A better-educated population would bring with it added benefits of improved health, increased civic engagement, and reduced reliance on public services (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2005). For immigrants themselves, and for their new homeland, increased access to higher education can provide considerable opportunity for positive growth.

In recent years, the public policy debate over immigration—both generally and in terms of access to higher education—has focused almost exclusively on undocumented immigrants. Members of Congress have proposed heightened border security, increased enforcement of immigration laws, and even the criminalization of undocumented immigrants and those who help them. In the realm of access to higher education, federal law limits access to in-state tuition at public institutions for undocumented immigrants unless the same benefit is provided to all American citizens. In response, some state legislatures have redefined their in-state tuition policies to include any student (including undocumented students) who graduates from a high school in the state.

In the often rancorous debates that have accompanied efforts to address the issue of illegal immigration, little attention has been paid to the large population of legal immigrants who live in the United States and may wish to pursue postsecondary education. Much of what has been written on the topic of immigrant access to higher education, moreover, focuses on students who immigrate as children and spend some time in the American K–12 educational system. The many immigrants who enter the country as adults are rarely discussed in either the academic literature or policy debates about access to higher education.

With this report, we intend to address that gap. Our focus will be on the barriers faced by legal immigrants who seek to enroll in postsecondary education, regardless of their age at the time of immigration, but with particular attention to older immigrants who must confront significant challenges in understanding and gaining access to the U.S. system of higher education because they did not attend American primary and secondary schools. We will also discuss the barriers to persistence and completion faced by immigrant students who do enroll in college, a group that makes up 12 percent of the U.S. undergraduate population but whose postsecondary completion rate, especially for bachelor's degrees, lags behind the U.S. average (NCES 2001; 2004). We will discuss some of the challenges faced by undocumented immigrants, but our focus will be on those who reside in the United States legally—in part because of the lack of data on undocumented college students but, more important, because legal immigrants are a key part of our nation's future. If America is to remain competitive in the global economy, we must recognize the importance of access to higher education for immigrants and create public policies that meet their educational needs.

### **Who is an immigrant? Data sources and definitions**

A common sense definition of an immigrant is “a person who enters the United States with the intention of remaining here permanently.” While this definition seems straightforward, it is complicated by questions of legal status and intent. Undocumented immigrants enter the country illegally and may or may not intend to reside here permanently. Refugees enter the country legally and often with the intention of remaining permanently but are required to wait one year before applying for official immigrant status. Undocumented immigrants and non-immigrant visitors such as foreign students or temporary workers may also apply to adjust their status to that of legal immigrant. All these various circumstances, when combined with the different approaches federal agencies use to collect data on the immigrant population, greatly complicate the definition of “immigrant” for researchers.

The primary source of federal data on legal entrants into the United States is the Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS), a division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The data collected by this office focus on three groups, the first two of which are considered to be immigrants:

- **Legal permanent residents** (“green card” holders)—foreign nationals who have been given the right to live permanently in the United States. Some legal permanent residents are new entrants to the United States, while others have had their immigration status adjusted for various reasons (Jefferys and Rytina 2006).

- **Naturalized citizens**—legal permanent residents who have fulfilled the requirements for naturalization, including residing in the country for at least five years and demonstrating proficiency in English, knowledge of U.S. history and government, and good moral character (Simanski and Rytina 2006).
- **Non-immigrants**—foreign nationals who enter the United States temporarily. Such persons include tourists, business travelers, foreign students, temporary workers, and diplomats, all of whom are expected to remain in the United States for only a limited time (Grieco 2006b).

The data collected by OIS are useful in determining the numbers and basic demographic characteristics of legal immigrant and non-immigrant entrants into the United States but do not include information on undocumented immigrants, data on the experiences of immigrants after they enter the country (except regarding a change of immigration status), or comparisons with the native-born population.

The U.S. Census Bureau, on the other hand, collects extensive data on a variety of topics relevant to the study of immigration through the Decennial Census and surveys such as the American Community Survey. These surveys are intended to gather data on all residents of the United States, regardless of immigration status. Census Bureau data identify U.S. citizens, both native-born and naturalized, but make no distinctions among various categories of non-citizens. Analyses of the foreign-born population using Census Bureau data, therefore, include naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, temporary and humanitarian migrants,

and undocumented residents—a much broader category than the definition of immigrant set forth by OIS (U.S. Census Bureau 2006a).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), part of the U.S. Department of Education, includes immigrant status in its surveys of K–12 and postsecondary students. These surveys create separate categories for groups such as foreign students, non-citizens eligible for federal financial aid (including legal permanent residents and humanitarian migrants), foreign-born citizens, and citizens born in the United States. The data, however, make no distinction between foreign-born citizens who received their citizenship through naturalization and those who were citizens from birth because at least one parent was a U.S. citizen (a group that OIS would not consider immigrants). NCES data also may not include undocumented immigrants. When they do, it is not possible to distinguish these students from other foreign-born students. Analyses of the foreign-born population using NCES data will thus include the foreign-born children of U.S. citizens while potentially excluding undocumented residents and some, but not all, temporary migrants (NCES 2004).

In the end, researchers who study immigration cannot make perfect comparisons across data sources. Both Census Bureau and NCES data include in their definitions of the foreign-born population categories of individuals who are not considered immigrants by OIS, and these categories differ across the two agencies. For the purposes of this report, we have used a broad definition of immigrant: a person who legally enters the United States with the intention of remaining here permanently.

TABLE 1

## Differing Categorizations of Immigrants Versus Non-Immigrants and Native-Born Versus Foreign-Born in Data Collected by Federal Agencies

	OFFICE OF IMMIGRATION STATISTICS	U.S. CENSUS BUREAU	NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS
<b>CITIZENS</b>			
BORN IN U.S. TERRITORIES	N/A	Native-Born	U.S. Born Citizen
BORN ABROAD TO U.S. CITIZEN PARENT(S)	N/A	Native-Born	Foreign-Born Citizen
NATURALIZED	Immigrant	Foreign-Born	Foreign-Born Citizen
<b>NON-CITIZENS</b>			
LEGAL PERMANENT RESIDENTS	Immigrant	Foreign-Born	Resident Alien
NON-RESIDENT ALIENS	Non-Immigrant	Foreign-Born	Foreign or International Student
UNDOCUMENTED RESIDENTS	N/A	Foreign-Born	N/A

NOTE: RED TEXT INDICATES THE POPULATION FROM EACH DATA SOURCE USED FOR THE ANALYSES IN THIS REPORT.

However, as noted, it is not possible to isolate this group in some of the data sources used in this report. As a result, the population we call “immigrants” varies depending on the data source (TABLE 1). While we have made every effort to be clear about the sources we use in this report, readers are advised to use caution in comparing information about immigrants across data sources.<sup>1</sup>

### Overview of the report

The report begins with information on the immigrant population of the United States, derived from data compiled by OIS and the U.S. Census Bureau. The first chapter presents a demographic profile of this population and discusses changing patterns of immigration. It examines data on educational attainment and employment for foreign-born residents to make the argument that increasing access to higher education for immigrants is crucial to both economic growth and social progress in this nation. However, gaining access to postsecondary education is not always easy for immigrants. The second chapter uses a review of the literature on this topic and conversations with a number of immigrant students to examine the many barriers faced by these students as they seek higher education. Significant barriers—which include the stresses of immigration, work and family responsibilities, financial need, academic preparation and achievement, and limited English proficiency—can make it quite difficult for immigrants to enroll in and complete postsecondary educational programs. Throughout the report,

anonymous comments from immigrant college students interviewed for this project are used to illustrate these barriers.

The third chapter uses data from NCES to present a snapshot of immigrants who do enroll in American higher education. We offer demographic profiles of immigrant undergraduate and graduate students, and examine enrollment patterns, financial aid, and persistence and attainment for these students. The fourth chapter focuses on three states—New York, California, and Georgia—each of which faces quite different challenges in offering postsecondary education to foreign-born residents. These case studies are based on interviews with academic researchers, state and institutional policymakers, and advocates for immigrant rights whose comments are cited in the text. They describe the demographic and policy situations for immigrants in each of the three states and examine institutional and statewide efforts to increase—or, in some cases, limit—immigrant access to higher education. The report concludes by discussing the extent to which certain groups of immigrants, by virtue of age and region of origin, face greater challenges in gaining access to higher education. Finally, we offer recommendations for policy changes at the institutional, local, state, and federal levels that would benefit immigrants who are seeking to attend college in the United States. ❧

<sup>1</sup> See the appendix for a discussion of the relevant variables and the strengths and limitations of each data source used in this report.

# Immigrants in the United States

In 2005, the total foreign-born population in the United States was estimated to be 35.7 million, more than 12 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a).<sup>2</sup> Of these foreign-born residents, just under 15 million (42 percent) were naturalized citizens. The Office of Immigration Statistics estimates that 11.6 million legal permanent residents and 10.5 million undocumented immigrants also resided in the United States in 2005 (Hoefer, Rytina, and Campbell 2006; Rytina 2006).<sup>3</sup> These numbers add up to more than the 20.7 million non-citizens identified by the Census Bureau, but most researchers believe that undocumented residents are undercounted in federal surveys.

The immigration status of persons residing in the United States is constantly in flux. In 2005, the status of permanent legal resident was granted to more than 1.1 million people. Only 34 percent of them were new arrivals in the United States; the rest were already living here and simply adjusted their immigration status (Jefferys and Rytina 2006). The same year, more than 600,000 legal permanent residents became naturalized citizens (Simanski and Rytina 2006). On any given day, it is estimated that there are approximately 3.8 million non-immigrant foreign nationals in the United States (Grieco 2006a).

By any measure, immigration to the United States remains at very high levels—between 1990 and 2000, the foreign-born population increased by 57 percent. This substantial increase in foreign-born residents accounted for more than a third of the total increase in the U.S. population during this period (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). During the same time period, 9.3 million people became legal permanent residents, an increase of 49 percent over the previous decade (Simanski 2005). In

recent years, more immigrants have been admitted to the United States than ever before, although the rate of admission is lower than it was in the past: 3.2 immigrants per 1,000 U.S. residents in 2004, compared with 6.1 in 1990 and 10.4 during the period 1901–10 (U.S. Census Bureau 2006a).<sup>4</sup>

## Demographics

Immigrants to the United States are a diverse group. For example, in 2005, about 47 percent were Hispanic, 24 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 21 percent White non-Hispanic, and 8 percent Black. These figures reflect the extent to which, in recent years, Latin America and Asia have become the primary areas from which people immigrate to the

<sup>2</sup> The 2000 Decennial Census counted 31.1 million foreign-born residents—11 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The population estimate for legal permanent residents is from September 2004; that for undocumented residents is from January 2005.

<sup>4</sup> The rate was computed by dividing the sum of annual immigration totals by the sum of U.S. population totals for the same number of years.

United States. The vast majority of immigrants speak a language other than English in the home, and more than half say they do not speak English very well (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a).

Immigrants differ from the U.S. population as a whole on many characteristics. Compared with the total U.S. population, immigrants are more likely to be racial or ethnic minorities and to speak a language other than English in the home. Immigration has been responsible for a significant increase in racial and ethnic diversity in the United States. Between 1970 and 2000, the racial and ethnic minority portion of the population increased from 13 percent to over 30 percent, a change largely driven by immigration from Latin American and Asian countries (Hirschman 2005).

Households headed by immigrants are more likely to contain children than those headed by U.S. citizens (Fix, Zimmerman, and Passel 2001). However, immigrants are themselves less likely to be of traditional school age. In 2005, more than a third of the U.S. population was under age 25, compared with only 18 percent of foreign-born residents (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a). This apparent discrepancy is driven by the prevalence of immigrant families whose children are U.S. citizens: 75 percent of children with immigrant parents are themselves American citizens (Fix, Zimmerman, and Passel 2001).

Historically, immigrants from Europe have made up much of the foreign-born population of the United States, but changes in immigration law over the past half-century have dramatically altered that pattern. In 2005, 38 percent of all new legal immigrants came from Latin America and the Caribbean, while 36 percent came from Asia, 16 percent from Europe, 8 percent from Africa, and 3 percent from other areas (Jefferys and Rytina 2006). The U.S. foreign-born population is now largely made up of immigrants from Latin America and Asia. In 2005, more than half of foreign-born residents were born in Latin America (FIGURE 1).

Region of origin is an important factor to consider when studying immigrants, because it accounts for some significant demographic differences within this population. For example, immigrants from Europe are more likely than the total foreign-born population to be age 45 or older. By contrast, immigrants from Latin America, compared with the total foreign-born population, are more likely to be between the ages of 18 and 44. Almost two-thirds of Latin American immigrants say they do not speak

English very well, and more than a third have an income 150 percent below the federal poverty level. Asian immigrants, as a group, are less likely than the overall foreign-born population to be living in poverty, but almost half say they do not speak English well (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a).

Immigrants tend to be clustered in certain U.S. states. Between 2000 and 2003, more than half of new legal immigrants settled in four states: California, New York, Florida, and Texas (Simanski 2005). These states have been among the top destinations for immigrants for many years and have high percentages of immigrants in their populations. For example, in 2005, 27 percent of California residents were foreign-born, as were 21 percent of New York residents (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a). However, in recent years, immigrants have begun to move beyond the traditional immigration states, particularly to the Southeast. North Carolina, for instance, saw its foreign-born population increase by 274 percent between 1990 and 2000, and Georgia's immigrant population increased by 233 percent during the same period (Migration Policy Institute 2006).

### Educational Attainment

Examining the educational attainment of the immigrant population is central to assessing the need for access to higher education. Since 1965, U.S. immigration policy has given priority to family reunification. In 2005, 58 percent of new legal permanent residents were close relatives of U.S. citizens or legal residents, while another 13 percent were humanitarian admissions such as refugees (Jefferys and Rytina 2006). These family-sponsored and humanitarian immigrants are admitted without any requirements for education or specific skills, unlike the smaller proportion of immigrants who are admitted under employment-based preferences. As a result, educational attainment among immigrants has declined in comparison with the native-born population (Vernez, Krop, and Rydell 2003).

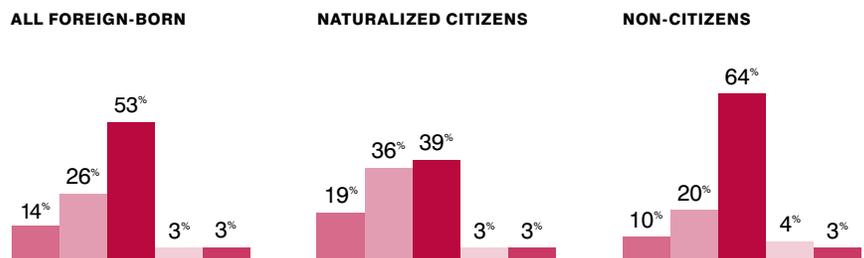
In 2005, immigrants generally had lower levels of educational attainment than the U.S. population as a whole. This was especially true for immigrants who were not U.S. citizens, 63 percent of whom had no more than a high school education, compared with 46 percent of the overall U.S. population (FIGURE 2).

However, it is important to note that many immigrants have substantially higher levels of educational attainment. In fact, naturalized citizens are more likely than the overall U.S. population to have completed a

FIGURE 1

## Distribution of U.S. Foreign-Born Population by Citizenship and Region of Origin, 2005

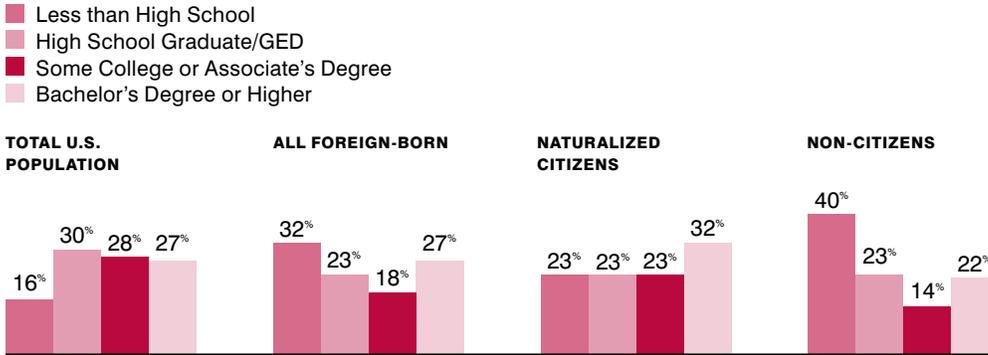
Legend:  
 Europe (light pink)  
 Asia (medium pink)  
 Latin America (dark pink)  
 Africa (lightest pink)  
 Other (darkest pink)



NOTE: OTHER INCLUDES OCEANIA AND CANADA.  
 SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

FIGURE 2

## Distribution of U.S. Foreign-Born Population Age 25 and Older by Citizenship and Educational Attainment, 2005



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a). A study of immigrants who were granted legal permanent residency in 1996 found a similarly skewed distribution of educational attainment (Population Reference Bureau 2001). In this study, 20 percent of new immigrants had less than nine years of formal education (compared with 6 percent of native-born U.S. citizens). On the other hand, new immigrants were twice as likely as native-born citizens to have completed at least some post-baccalaureate education. This two-tailed distribution makes it difficult to make general statements about educational attainment among immigrants without dividing the population into smaller groups.

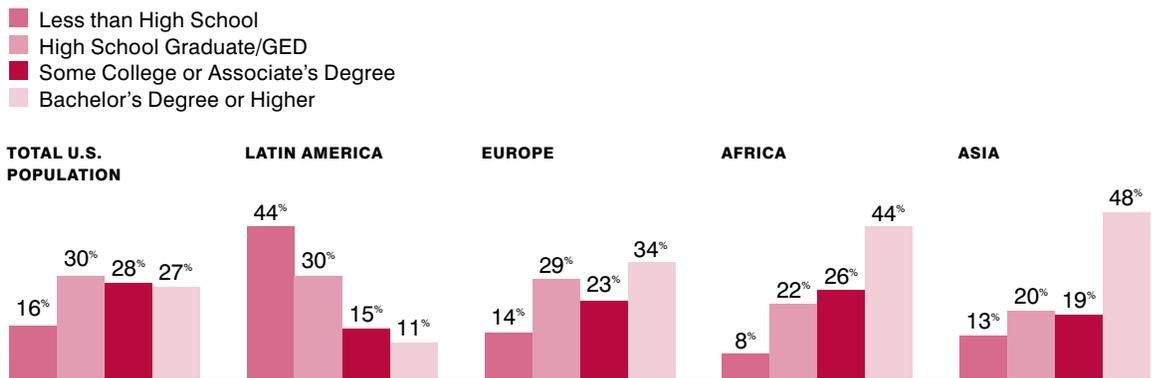
Along with visa category and citizenship status, region of origin plays a key role in educational attainment for immigrants. Educational attainment is generally lower among immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2005, 44 percent of U.S. residents born in Latin America had not graduated from high school, and another 30 percent had earned a high school diploma or GED but had never attended college. Immigrants from Europe, on the other hand, were more likely than the overall U.S. population to hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and African and Asian immigrants tend to be very well-educated, with 44 and 48 percent respectively having earned at least a bachelor's degree (FIGURE 3).<sup>5</sup>

Age at the time of immigration plays an important role in educational attainment. Research has found that

<sup>5</sup> It is not possible to ascertain from these data whether college degrees held by immigrants were earned before or after entering the United States.

FIGURE 3

## Distribution of U.S. Foreign-Born Population Age 25 and Older by Region of Origin and Educational Attainment, 2005



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

immigrants who enter the United States after age 45 tend to have the lowest level of educational attainment of any immigrant group. Immigrants who enter the country before age 13, on the other hand, have the highest level of educational attainment of any immigrant group and compare favorably with native-born Americans. Immigrants who come to this country between the ages of 13 and 44 have lower rates of educational attainment than their younger counterparts, although still higher than that of older immigrants. In the 13–44 age group, those who arrive between the ages of 13 and 19 have the lowest rates of educational attainment, suggesting that immigrating during the late teenage years

places young people at a particular educational disadvantage (Chiswick and DebBurman 2003). Age at time of immigration is also related to region of origin. For example, the countries that send the highest percentages of teenage and young adult immigrants to the United States are in Latin America, while Asian countries send the highest percentages of adults age 25–54 (Rumbaut 2004).

In looking at educational attainment for immigrants, it is difficult to know exactly what level of education was reached before they arrived in the United States. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at immigrants who are young enough that it is less likely that they earned a college degree before coming to this country. This group of young adult immigrants shows some important differences in educational attainment compared with non-immigrants. Among immigrants age 18–24 in 2005, only 70 percent had graduated from high school, compared with 86 percent of their native-born peers. Around a third of these immigrant young people had attended at least some college, compared with almost half of non-immigrants. These differences in educational attainment

become more pronounced among immigrants who are not naturalized American citizens—only 65 percent were high school graduates and 28 percent had attended at least some college. Among naturalized citizens, on the other hand, 89 percent were high school graduates and 55 percent had attended at least some college—numbers higher than those for native-born citizens (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b).

As with all immigrants, educational attainment for these young adults varied for different subgroups (TABLE 2). Almost half (46 percent) of immigrants age 18–24 had come to America between the ages of 13 and 19, and are thus likely to be at a disadvantage when it comes to educational attainment. In this group, 62 percent were high school graduates, compared with 81 percent of immigrants age 18–24 who came to the United States before age 13. Region of origin plays a crucial role in educational attainment for young adult immigrants. As of 2005, immigrants from Asia, Europe, and Africa were somewhat more likely to be high school graduates than were native-born Americans. Young adult immigrants from Latin America, on the other hand, made up fully two-thirds of this immigrant age group and had very low educational attainment compared with both native-born citizens and their fellow immigrants. Only 59 percent of these young immigrants were high school graduates, and only 20 percent had attended at least some college (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b).

### College Enrollment

Data on college enrollment can provide important information about access to higher education for immigrants. Since the years between ages 18 and 24 are the traditional time for young people to attend college, differences in college enrollment between immigrants and native-born citizens in this age group may indicate barriers to accessing high education. Among young people age 18–24, immigrants were only slightly less likely than their native-born peers to be enrolled in college (27 percent versus 36 percent). However, the differences between naturalized citizens and non-citizens were dramatic, especially when considering that non-citizens were less likely to have graduated from high school (FIGURE 4). Forty-seven percent of naturalized citizens in this group were enrolled in college, a number considerably higher than that for native-born citizens. Only 22 percent of non-citizens were enrolled in college, suggesting that citizenship plays a crucial, albeit not fully understood, role in providing access to higher education (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b).<sup>6</sup>

College enrollment rates for immigrants, like educational attainment, varied by length of time in the United States and by region of origin. Only 22 percent of immigrants age 18–24 who immigrated between the

TABLE 2

## Educational Attainment for Immigrants Age 18–24 by Citizenship, Age at Time of Immigration, and Region of Origin, 2005

	NOT A HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE	SOME COLLEGE	BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER
<b>ALL IMMIGRANTS AGE 18–24</b>	30%	36%	26%	8%
<b>CITIZENSHIP</b>				
<b>NATURALIZED CITIZENS</b>	11%	34%	41%	14%
<b>NON-CITIZENS</b>	35%	37%	22%	6%
<b>AGE AT TIME OF IMMIGRATION</b>				
<b>BEFORE AGE 13</b>	19%	39%	34%	8%
<b>AGE 13–19</b>	38%	36%	21%	5%
<b>REGION OF ORIGIN</b>				
<b>ASIA</b>	9%	29%	43%	20%
<b>AFRICA</b>	12%	34%	44%	9%
<b>EUROPE</b>	11%	31%	43%	15%
<b>LATIN AMERICA</b>	41%	39%	17%	3%

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

ages of 13 and 19 were enrolled in college in 2005, compared with 37 percent of those who immigrated before age 13. Latin American immigrants were at a considerable disadvantage compared with immigrants from other regions (FIGURE 5). While 56 percent of high school graduates age 18–24 who were from Asia were enrolled in college, along with 52 percent of Africans and 47 percent of Europeans, less than 15 percent of Latin American immigrants in this age group were attending college (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b). People who came to the United States between the ages of 13 and 19 and immigrants from Latin America were also less likely than other immigrants to have graduated from high school. Overall, these numbers indicate a significant lack of access to higher education for these two immigrant groups.

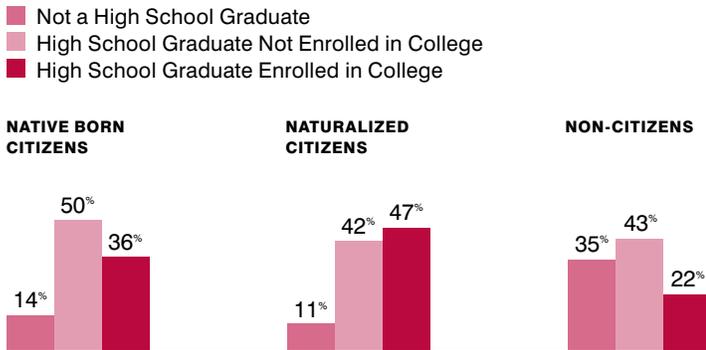
### Immigrants in the Workforce

Mass immigration (especially the substantial number of immigrants with less than a high school education) has had a significant impact on the American labor force. In 2005, around 15 percent of the civilian labor force age 16 and older was foreign-born, a percentage higher than the foreign-born share of the total population while the unemployment rate for immigrants was virtually identical to that of native-born citizens. Immigrant workers were more likely than native-born citizens to be male and not to have completed high school. The most common occupational area for immigrant workers was the service industry, especially food preparation and building and grounds cleaning and maintenance. Factory work, construction, and farming were also common occupations for foreign-born workers (U.S. Department of Labor 2006).

<sup>6</sup> The non-citizen immigrants discussed here include undocumented residents as well as legal permanent residents.

FIGURE 4

## Distribution of U.S. Population Age 18 to 24 by Citizenship and Educational Status, 2005



NOTE: HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES NOT ENROLLED IN COLLEGE MAY ALREADY HAVE EARNED A POSTSECONDARY DEGREE.

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

Immigrant workers, in general, earned less than native-born workers in 2005. The median weekly wage for immigrants was \$511—25 percent less than the \$677 earned by native-born workers. Weekly wages were especially low for Latino immigrants, who earned only \$412—39 percent less than the median for native-born workers (U.S. Department of Labor 2006). Region of origin plays a large role in determining income. Among immigrants born in Latin America, more than half (53 percent) earned less than \$25,000 in 2005, compared with 26 percent of the U.S. population as a whole. In sharp contrast, 43 percent of Asian immigrants earned \$50,000 or more in 2005, compared with 34 percent of the total U.S. population (FIGURE 6). The stark differences in income between these two immigrant groups are closely correlated with differences in educational attainment.

Despite the low wages earned by many immigrants, a study of new legal immigrants in 1996 found that their financial situation improved significantly upon arrival in the United States. Men in this study saw a 68 percent increase in earnings over their last job abroad, and women saw a 62 percent increase (Population Reference Bureau 2001). This increase may be particularly important for immigrants from Latin America. A recent study found that more than half of the Latin American immigrants surveyed were unemployed before moving to the United States and that, once they arrived in America, more than half found a job within a month at an average monthly salary more than six times what they had earned in their home country (Inter-American Development Bank 2006). Moreover, immigrants who have resided in the United States longer tend to have higher incomes. For example, in 2005, the median income of male immigrants who arrived before 1990 was \$38,564, compared with \$22,656 for male immigrants who arrived in 2000 or later. Naturalized citizens (who are required to have lived in the country for at least five years before naturalization) also have higher median incomes than non-citizens (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a).

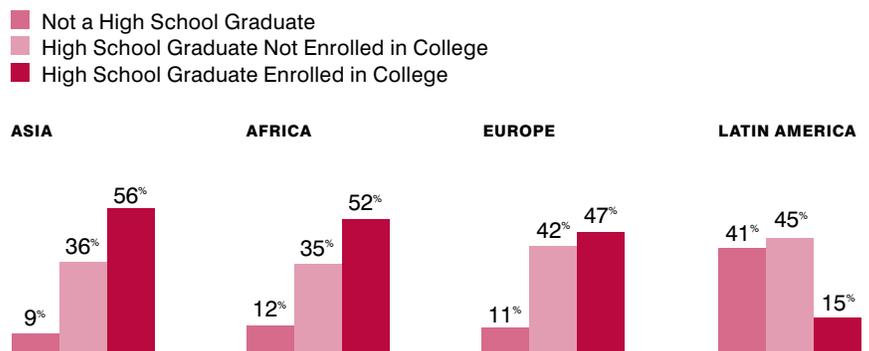
One area in which immigrants contribute significantly to the American economy is as entrepreneurs. For more than a century, immigrants have been more likely than native-born citizens to operate their own businesses. In New York City, almost half of all self-employed workers are immigrants, although immigrants make up just over a third of the city's population. In Los Angeles, 22 of the fastest growing companies in 2005 were owned by immigrants (Bowles and Colton 2007). Research has shown that self-employed immigrants have substantially higher earnings than immigrants working for wages or salaries, regardless of region of origin (Lofstrom 1999). As the number of immigrants in the U.S. population increases at a record pace, these new residents have the potential to play a key role in the economies of the nation's largest cities, although they face challenges related to language and cultural barriers. Without English language skills and knowledge of American business practices, immigrant entrepreneurs may have trouble navigating the complex regulatory environment that surrounds small businesses. Also, they may find it difficult to market their businesses beyond their local immigrant communities (Bowles and Colton 2007). For immigrant entrepreneurs, as for immigrant employees, higher education may be a means to improve their economic situation.

## Value of Higher Education for Immigrants and Society

These demographic trends underscore the importance of higher education for immigrants to the United States. Today's immigrants, particularly those from Latin America, are more likely to have lower levels of educational attainment than the native-born population. Lack of education and the challenges of learning a new language and adjusting to a new culture force many immigrants to take low-wage jobs to survive. Access to higher education can be a turning point for these immigrants and their families. As we heard in conversations with a number of immigrant students, a college education provides an opportunity to satisfy a love of learning, gain skills that can lead to better jobs and higher wages, provide for and be a role model for their children, and, most important, give back to their new homeland by becoming more educated and effective citizens. An immigrant student from Paraguay summed up this

FIGURE 5

## Distribution of U.S. Foreign-Born Population Age 18 to 24 by Region of Origin and Educational Status, 2005



NOTE: HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES NOT ENROLLED IN COLLEGE MAY ALREADY HAVE EARNED A POSTSECONDARY DEGREE.

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

feeling when she said, “A college education is good for the country and for future generations.”

Higher levels of educational attainment are closely correlated with higher income in the general U.S. population. As of 2005, the median income for men who had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher was 63 percent higher than the median income of high school graduates who never attended college. Unemployment rates are lower for persons with higher educational attainment. In 2005, the unemployment rate for those with bachelor’s degrees or higher was 2.3 percent, compared with 5.4 percent for high school graduates with no college education and 8.8 percent for those who did not graduate from high school (College Board 2006). College-educated workers—both immigrant and native-born—are more likely to be self-employed than those with lower levels of education (Lofstrom 1999). For immigrants, as for native-born citizens, higher education can be a path to prosperity.

In the economy of the 21st century, higher education is crucial to occupational advancement. Research indicates that the two fastest growing occupational groups—expected to add 60 percent of total job growth through 2014—are professional occupations and the service industry (Hecker 2005). As noted above, immigrants tend to be employed in the service industry, where they fill jobs unlikely to be filled by an increasingly older and better educated native-born workforce (Immigration Policy Center 2005). While immigrants play a valuable economic role in the U.S. labor force by filling these jobs, service industry jobs typically pay low wages and offer little opportunity for advancement. Moreover, while the number of jobs requiring only a high school education is expected to increase by 10 percent by 2014, the number of jobs requiring at least some college is expected to increase by 20 percent (Hecker 2005).

In addition to the direct monetary return on educational investment, various studies have shown substantial indirect benefits, ranging from better health to increased community engagement (Baum and Payea 2004; Institute for Higher Education Policy 2005). These benefits—both

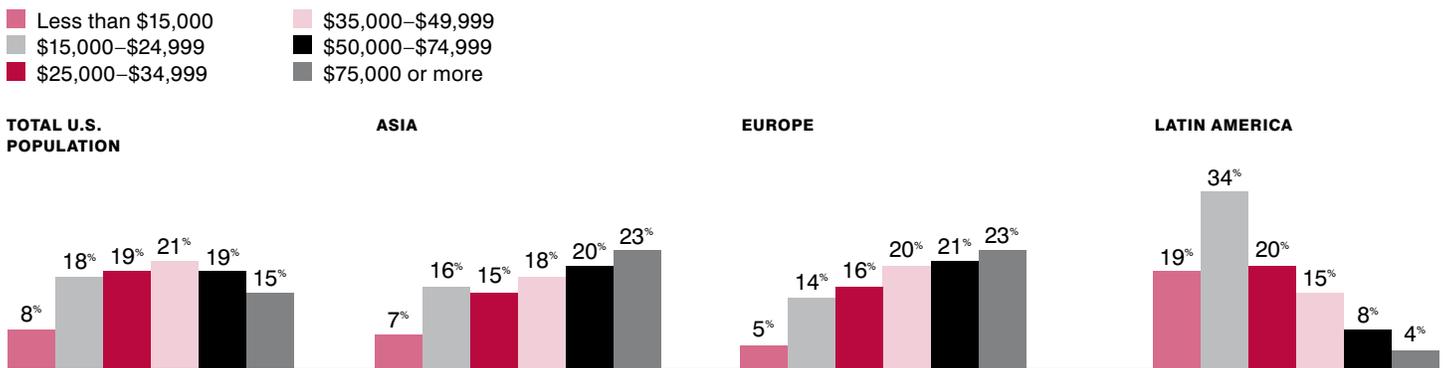
economic and social—extend to the children of immigrants as well. By 2040, experts project that the children of immigrants—including children who are immigrants themselves and the native-born children of immigrant parents—will make up a third of the K–12 student population (C. Suárez-Orozco 2001). The children of wealthier and better educated parents tend to lead healthier lives, perform better in school, and go on to postsecondary education themselves. Improving the financial situation of immigrants will very likely enhance their children’s lives as well.

Higher education also offers significant benefits to society. More education can lead to higher incomes, which in turn, lead to additional tax revenues, greater productivity, and increased consumption, all of which add to the nation’s economy. Studies have shown that better educated people are less likely to be incarcerated or rely on public assistance and are more likely to vote and volunteer in their communities (Baum and Payea 2004; Institute for Higher Education Policy 2005). Educated immigrants, in particular, have much to offer American society, including the ability to speak several languages and an understanding of more than one culture—skills that are increasingly valuable as the United States becomes more economically connected to the global community.

Throughout American history, immigration has been a route to a better life. Today, given the economic and social realities of the 21st century, gaining access to social mobility often requires gaining access to postsecondary education. As more immigrants enter the United States, it becomes increasingly necessary to ensure that those who want it have the chance to obtain a college education. Both the immigrants themselves and the nation as a whole will reap the benefits of developing better educated workers, potential entrepreneurs, and more engaged citizens. As an immigrant student from Bolivia put it, “A college degree is a piece of paper that means this person is somebody. I want to be somebody here in America.”

FIGURE 6

## Distribution of U.S. Foreign-Born Population Age 16 and Older by Region of Origin and Income, 2005



NOTE: INCOME IS BASED ON EARNINGS FOR THE PAST 12 MONTHS FOR FULL-TIME, YEAR-ROUND WORKERS AND IS GIVEN IN 2005 INFLATION-ADJUSTED DOLLARS. SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

# Barriers to Higher Education Access and Success for Immigrants



Immigration is a volatile public policy issue in the United States, particularly with regard to undocumented immigrants, but it is likely that immigrants will continue to come to this country and will become increasingly important members of the American workforce. Many of these immigrants will need a postsecondary education to enable them to contribute effectively to the economy. Immigrants, like other Americans with low incomes, face financial, socioeconomic, and cultural barriers to higher education. However, for immigrants, the road to higher education can be particularly difficult. A variety of factors—including the stresses of immigration, work and family responsibilities, financial need, academic preparation and achievement, and limited English proficiency—can influence immigrants’ educational aspirations and access to higher education. If policymakers are to develop effective ways of helping immigrants gain access to higher education and succeed in college, they will have to address these barriers.

The situation is complicated by the fact that two different groups of immigrants may seek access to higher education. Much of the academic literature on the subject has focused on prospective college students who immigrated as children and went through the American K–12 educational system, a group sometimes called “1.5 generation immigrants” (Rumbaut 2004). These students have been found to have educational outcomes in K–12 education comparable to, or in some cases better than, their native-born peers, despite the disadvantage of having to learn English (Kao and Tienda 1995; Fuligni 1997; Kaufman et al. 1999). For these students, gaining access to higher education may be a challenge, as many of them come from low-income families, but their academic achievement in primary and secondary education is likely to be an asset.

However, in 2005, 84 percent of new legal permanent residents were age 15 or older, and two-thirds were age 25 and older (Jefferys and Rytina 2006). Adult immigrants may seek higher education to improve their job skills and find higher paying employment, and they face a somewhat different, and perhaps more challenging, set of potential barriers than those experienced by younger immigrants. In the following discussion we will address the barriers to access faced by both groups of prospective college students, but our primary focus will be on immigrants who come to the United States as teenagers or adults.

### **Stresses of Immigration**

One of the greatest challenges for many immigrants is the experience of immigration itself. Some people come to this country to escape wars or persecution and may suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder. Not all immigrants arrive as part of a family unit—very often immigrants are separated from or reunited with family members during the immigration process. Among the more than 1 million immigrants who became legal permanent residents in 2005, for example, almost 650,000 were family-sponsored immigrants, most of them the children or spouses of immigrants already in the United States (Jefferys and Rytina 2006).

From a psychological point of view, even when immigration is not accompanied by familial separation or previous traumatic experiences, it can be stressful. Coping with such an enormous life transition is difficult when a person cannot rely upon familiar social networks and support mechanisms, as is often the case for immigrants who find themselves removed from family members and friends. Even seemingly simple tasks such as buying groceries or opening a bank account can require significant effort for immigrants who are unfamiliar with American customs and, in many cases, do not yet speak English well. Enrolling in college—a process that includes navigating a highly complex admissions and financial aid system—may be beyond the immediate capacity of some recent immigrants. The stresses of immigration can be particularly challenging for immigrants who arrive in the United States as teenagers and face the prospect of adapting to both adulthood and a new language and culture in a matter of only a few years (Perez 2006).

### **Lack of Information About Postsecondary Education**

An essential factor in access to postsecondary education is obtaining “college knowledge”—that is, gaining an understanding of the complex processes of college admissions and finance in the United States—from undertaking appropriate college-preparatory work in high school and taking the SAT or ACT exams, to selecting and applying to suitable colleges, to locating and applying for various types of financial aid. Research has shown that this sort of information is not always readily available to prospective college students, especially low-income students and those whose parents did not attend college and are unfamiliar with the U.S. postsecondary education system. These students are also likely to attend high schools with few resources to hire guidance counselors or provide Internet access to help students plan for college. Immigrant high school students, many of whom are low-income and/or have parents who did not attend college, face the additional barriers of language difficulties and a general lack of familiarity with the American higher education system. Students who are not enrolled in the college preparatory track—including many ESL students—may not receive any college counseling at all (McDonough 2004; Vargas 2004).

Older immigrants, who may not have attended any American school, are likely to be even more alienated from key sources of college knowledge. As one older immigrant student put it, “I’m confused—I don’t know who to talk to about how to enroll, what courses to take, how much I’ll need to pay.” Some immigrant students cited the Internet as a key source of information about college, but they generally agreed that the best course of action was to visit the college or university and talk in person with

admissions counselors. For a person who is unfamiliar with the American system of higher education, however, researching various colleges and identifying the appropriate office to visit can be a daunting prospect.

Research on financial aid awareness among Latino youth in California suggests the extent of this problem. Although most of the young adults surveyed for this project were not themselves first-generation immigrants, many were second-generation immigrants—with at least one foreign-born parent. Among this group of 18- to 24-year-olds, 98 percent thought that a college education was important, but many were worried about taking on debt and losing out on opportunities to earn needed income by working. Few of these young people could accurately estimate how much it would cost to attend various universities, although more were aware of how much it would cost to go to a community college.

Strikingly, over half of the survey respondents thought that only American citizens (as opposed to legal residents) were eligible for federal and state financial aid, and 25 percent thought that their parents also had to be citizens for them to receive financial aid (Zarate and Pachon 2006). These results show that a lack of information about the college admissions and financial aid processes can be a formidable barrier for immigrants who wish to attend college.

### **Work and Family Responsibilities**

Many immigrant college students are non-traditional students. More than half of immigrant college students are age 24 or older, one-third have dependents, and almost three-quarters work full- or part-time while attending school (NCES 2004). For these students, work and family responsibilities can create enormous pressures, as they try to

## **Undocumented Immigrants and Higher Education**

**In any discussion of higher education and immigrants, one of the first topics to arise is legal status. Undocumented immigrants face extreme barriers in gaining access to postsecondary education in the United States. In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled in Plyler v. Doe that states may not deny a student's right to a public school education because of immigration status, but this ruling does not apply to postsecondary education. As a result, undocumented immigrants do not have access to federal or most state student financial aid. Some states have even considered passing laws that would prohibit public colleges and universities from enrolling undocumented students under any circumstances. In addition, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996 prohibits states from providing undocumented immigrants with in-state tuition at public colleges or universities unless the same benefit is provided to all American citizens (Rhymer 2005).**

After the implementation of this federal legislation, several states tried new legislative strategies to provide undocumented students with some higher education benefits. These laws generally require that, to be eligible for in-state tuition at public colleges and universities, undocumented students must reside in the state for a specific period, graduate from a high school in the state, and sign an affidavit of their intent to file for legal immigration status. California and Texas were the first two states to use such legislation to allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition; New York, Utah, Washington, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Illinois, Kansas, and Nebraska have since passed similar laws (National Immigration Law Center 2006a). In New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma, undocumented students are also eligible for at least some state financial aid (American Association of State Colleges and Universities 2005). Although there have been several legal challenges to these laws, none have been successful in overturning them.

Recently, efforts have been made in Congress to change the situation of undocumented college students nationwide. This legislation, known as the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, would allow states to define residency requirements for in-state tuition and other higher education benefits without considering immigration status. The bill would provide a mechanism through which undocu-

mented students could apply for legal residency, provided they met certain requirements, and would ensure that undocumented students who are adjusting their immigration status are eligible for federal financial aid. At this point, however, efforts to pass the DREAM Act have been overshadowed by the more general debates about illegal immigration (National Immigration Law Center 2006b).

Legislative efforts that focus on providing in-state tuition for undocumented students provide only part of the solution. Undocumented students may find it very difficult to pay for college, even with in-state tuition, if they are barred from receiving state and federal student aid. Moreover, the laws passed in states like California apply only to students who graduate from in-state high schools. Undocumented immigrants who enter the country as adults or who do not complete high school in the United States are not eligible under these provisions. Finally, even the native-born children of undocumented immigrants, despite the fact that they are American citizens, may find it difficult to receive federal financial aid, because they cannot provide required information, such as social security numbers, for their parents. They may also fear that applying for aid will draw attention to their parents' undocumented status. Thus, the problem of college access for undocumented immigrants has an impact beyond the immigrants themselves.

# Almost three-quarters of Latin American immigrants send money to their relatives, and many of those who send money are young and relatively poor.

balance the time required for study with obligations to employers and the family. Required classes may not be offered outside work hours, or an employer may demand that a student worker change his or her work schedule without regard to the classes the student is taking. Adequate and affordable child care may not be available. A spouse may support the student's decision to attend college or may resent the time it takes away from family life. Sometimes, these students may have to make difficult choices: stopping out for a semester to earn money or to care for a seriously ill relative, or even dropping out of college altogether. Work and family responsibilities may prevent some immigrant students from enrolling in the first place.

Even traditional-age immigrant college students may face heavy work and family responsibilities. A study of Latin American immigrants in California, for example, found that the minor children in these families were often responsible for running errands, cleaning, caring for siblings, and translating for their parents. Many of these children also helped their parents with paid work, such as cleaning houses, mowing lawns, or serving food in a family-run restaurant (Orellana 2001). Such responsibilities can make succeeding in college a challenging prospect. Research on immigrant college students in New York City found that, while these students were highly motivated academically, they spent as much as 15 hours more each week on family responsibilities than their native-born peers, and these responsibilities made it more difficult for them to succeed in school. This pattern held true regardless of region of origin or socioeconomic status, suggesting that family responsibilities may be a barrier to higher education for many immigrants (Tseng 2004).

## Financial Need

Students from low-income families often find it hard to afford the expenses and forgone earnings associated with pursuing a college education, and immigrant families are considerably more likely than the general population to be living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a). For immigrants who come to the United States as adults, the financial challenges may prove overwhelming. Like many working adults who wish to attend college, immigrant students who must juggle work and study, and perhaps support a family, may find college a significant financial burden.

For younger students, the extent to which parents are willing and able to sponsor their college education is a crucial factor. Low-income parents possess fewer economic resources than their more affluent counterparts, and lack of security in terms of financial capital can make immigrant parents less willing to take on loan debt to pay for a college education. Research shows that immigrant students take out loans less often than the general population of college students (NCES 2004). Lack of information about the availability of financial aid and how to apply for

it can make immigrant parents less willing to invest in college. Some immigrant parents, not recognizing the long-term economic benefits of a college education, may be more inclined to encourage their children to work to help meet their family's immediate economic needs.

The low-income status of many immigrants is compounded by the need to send money back to their countries of origin. A recent study estimates that the Latin American immigrant population in the United States sent home around \$45 billion in 2006, representing as much as 10 percent of the total earnings for this group. Almost three-quarters of Latin American immigrants send money to their relatives, and many of those who send money are young (more than half are under age 35) and relatively poor, with annual incomes of less than \$30,000 (Inter-American Development Bank 2006). The financial pressure of these remittances, added to the low-income status of many immigrants, may put the price of a college education beyond reach.

## Academic Preparation and Achievement

Immigrants who come to the United States as adults may face barriers related to academic preparation when they seek to enroll in postsecondary education. Since access to K–12 education varies widely from nation to nation, some immigrants may arrive in the United States well prepared for college-level work, while others may not have completed the equivalent of high school. In general, research has shown that immigrants are likely to be better educated than the general population in their home countries; however, the educational differences between immigrants and non-immigrants from the same countries vary considerably by region of origin. For instance, during the 1980s, immigrants from Iran and India were much better educated than the general population of those countries, while the educational gap between immigrants and non-immigrants from Mexico and El Salvador was much smaller (Feliciano 2005). Moreover, immigrants from nations in which access to education is limited may be better educated than the general population of their home country and still not have completed schooling at the secondary level.

Educational systems also vary greatly in terms of the material taught and the instructional methods used. Some immigrants may find that they are not adequately prepared for college-level work in the United States, even though they have graduated from high school or previously attended college, while others may find that they have to take college courses that were considered secondary level in their own countries. One Latin American student we spoke with was enrolled in a postsecondary premedical program in his home country. He said students there specialize much earlier, and premedical work does not include as much math as is required here. As a result, he must take additional

math courses, which will increase the time and cost of completing his undergraduate degree.

Before a prospective student's level of academic preparation can be determined, he or she must have the foreign high school diploma or college transcript evaluated, either by the college or university itself or by one of several nonprofit organizations that does this sort of work. This process can take up to a month and requires a fee that can be as much as several hundred dollars. In many cases, institutions also require that the student provide an original transcript, which may not always be possible, especially if the student is a refugee or an undocumented immigrant (Gray, Rolph, and Melamid 1996). Such complications, when combined with a lack of familiarity with the American system of higher education, can be discouraging to an immigrant who seeks to earn a college degree.

Even for immigrants who arrive in the United States as children, navigating the K–12 educational system may not be easy. A recent study of educational barriers for Latino immigrants in Georgia found that these children and their parents had a limited understanding of the American school system. Some parents didn't understand that they needed specific documents to enroll their children in school or believed that they would have to pay tuition or buy books. While they are interested in their children's academic success, these parents found it difficult to communicate with teachers and administrators when their children were having problems (Bohon, Macpherson, and Atilas 2005). A study conducted in New York City—where 53 percent of children enrolled in public schools come from families in which English is not the primary language—found that 41 percent of parents with limited English reported having to use the child or another student as a translator when speaking to school staff. In addition, while 43 percent of these parents participated in school activities, 76 percent said they would participate if language translation services were available (New York Immigration Coalition and Advocates for Children of New York 2004).

Research has shown that immigrant students generally value education and have high expectations about their educational futures (Kao and Tienda 1995; Fuligni 1997; Kaufman et al. 1999). However, these young people may find it difficult to achieve their educational dreams. In recent years, an increasing number of teenage immigrants have been arriving in the United States with little formal schooling and literacy levels, even in their native languages, below what would be expected for their grade level (Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix 2000). Even immigrant teenagers with stronger academic backgrounds may be excluded from the college preparatory track in high school because of their lack of English language skills. Some teachers express lower expectations for immigrant

students because they do not speak English well, a factor that can lead immigrant students to lower their own expectations (Perez 2006). Finally, because many immigrant families are poor and live in poverty-stricken areas, their children are more likely to attend schools with inadequate resources and few opportunities for academic enrichment, making it difficult for them to learn the skills they need to get into college and succeed there (M. Suárez-Orozco 2001).

High school drop-out rates are high among young immigrants. In 2000, foreign-born teenagers ages 15 to 17 made up about 8 percent of that age group in the total U.S. population but represented almost 25 percent of high school drop-outs. Among immigrants who arrived in the United States before age eight, the drop-out rate was 5 percent, only a little higher than the 3 percent drop-out rate for native-born citizens. Among 15- to 17-year-olds who arrived when they were older, however, the drop-out rate was 10 percent, even for students who had gone to school continuously before immigrating. Among students in this age group who had experienced disruptions in their schooling before immigration, the drop-out rate was 71 percent, and this group made up nearly 40

percent of foreign-born high school drop-outs. The group of foreign-born high school drop-outs may include teenagers who came to the United States to work and never enrolled in American schools. Foreign-born drop-outs are more likely than their immigrant peers to be male, not to be living with their parents, to have arrived in the United States at an older age, and to

be living in poverty (Fry 2005). For this group of young people, attending college in America may seem like an unachievable goal.

Research has shown that immigrant students generally value education and have high expectations about their educational futures.

### Limited English Proficiency

Learning English is a crucial task for immigrants and one that can have a significant impact on access to higher education. In the 1999–2000 academic year, almost four and a half million students enrolled in U.S. public schools (over 9 percent of the total enrollment) were considered to have limited English proficiency (Kindler 2002). Programs and staff are insufficient to adequately support improving these students' language skills, particularly in high schools. During the 1993–94 academic year, for example, while more than three-quarters of elementary school students with limited English proficiency were enrolled in ESL or bilingual education programs, less than half of high school students received such instruction (Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix 2000). This lack of support can lead to student failure. A recent report on New York City, where more than 13 percent of K–12 students are classified as having limited English proficiency, notes that more than half of these students drop out of high school, compared with 32 percent of students who are proficient in English (New York Immigration Coalition and Advocates for Children of New York 2006).

Limited English proficiency is one of the primary barriers that prevent immigrant students from graduating from high school and moving into postsecondary education, especially immigrant students who come to the United States as teenagers and have only a few years to learn English before they finish high school. The study of recent Latino immigrants in Georgia mentioned above, for example, suggests that immigrants who arrive as teenagers with little formal education and poor English skills may come to believe that they can never catch up and so drop out of school. The same study notes that some students complete the necessary requirements to earn a high school diploma but fail the mandatory exit exams because of limited English skills (Bohon, Macpherson, and Atilas 2005). The practice of requiring students with limited English proficiency to take standardized tests, such as those mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, has recently become a topic of controversy, with some school systems arguing that these students should be tested primarily on their progress in learning English until they achieve sufficient mastery of the language to understand the standard reading tests (Glod 2007).<sup>7</sup>

For older immigrants who wish to attend college, limited English proficiency may be even more of a problem, and older immigrants are more likely than young immigrants to speak a language other than English. Among immigrants age 24 and older, for example, 18 percent reported that they spoke no English or did not speak English well, compared with only 5 percent of immigrants ages 18 to 23, the traditional age for college students (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b). Many colleges and universities require students who are not native speakers of English to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or a similar placement exam. Students who do not score high enough are required to take ESL classes before, and often concurrently with, their college courses (Gray, Rolph, and Melamid 1996). This added coursework can lengthen the time and add to the cost of earning a degree.

For adult immigrants who are not yet enrolled in college, gaining proficiency in English is a major challenge. A report on the availability of ESL classes in New York City, where the number of adults with limited English proficiency is expected to increase by 250,000 by 2010, found that ESL classes often had waiting lists or used lotteries to determine who could take the class. The city is home to a wide range of nonprofit and for-profit ESL programs, but difficulties with transportation and locating evening and weekend classes make it hard for many immigrants to attend these classes (New York Immigration Coalition 2001). Limited English proficiency, which can be an enormous barrier for immigrants in simply navigating the complexities of life and work in the United States, is a particular challenge for immigrants who wish to pursue higher education.

As the number of immigrants continues to grow, it is imperative for policymakers to consider how best to help potential college students gain access to and succeed in higher education. While the barriers described above do not affect every immigrant in the same way, their cumulative weight helps explain the disparities in educational attainment between immigrants and non-immigrants and between various immigrant subgroups. As the next chapter will show, immigrant students who do manage to enroll in college also face barriers to successfully completing a postsecondary degree. ❧

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<sup>7</sup> Immigrant students who have been enrolled in American schools for less than a year are exempt from the standard reading tests (Glod 2007).

# Enrollment Patterns Among Immigrants in American Higher Education

Immigrants face significant barriers in gaining access to higher education. They also tend to have lower levels of educational attainment than the general U.S. population, although educational attainment varies considerably depending on region of origin and age at the time of immigration. Immigrants of the traditional age to attend college are less likely than non-immigrants to have graduated from high school and be enrolled in college. Nonetheless, many immigrants do enroll in and complete postsecondary programs after arriving in America. To assess the extent to which immigrants are able to gain access to and succeed in higher education in the United States, we turn to an analysis of data on students enrolled in postsecondary institutions. These data allow us to present a snapshot of the current immigrant postsecondary student population.

## **Undergraduate Enrollment Patterns**

Immigrants made up 12 percent of undergraduate students in 2003–04, which makes this group comparable in size to students with disabilities (11 percent), Hispanic students (13 percent), and Black students (14 percent). Of immigrant college students, 52 percent were naturalized U.S. citizens and 48 percent legal permanent residents. The data show that many immigrant undergraduates are nontraditional students. Approximately 60 percent of the immigrant students in the study were considered independent for financial aid purposes, compared with half of the overall student population. Fifty-three percent of immigrant undergraduates were age 24 or older—compared with 43 percent of all undergraduates—and one-third of these immigrant students were age 30 or older. Forty-eight percent of immigrant undergraduates delayed enrollment by at least a year or two after completing high school, compared with 38 percent of

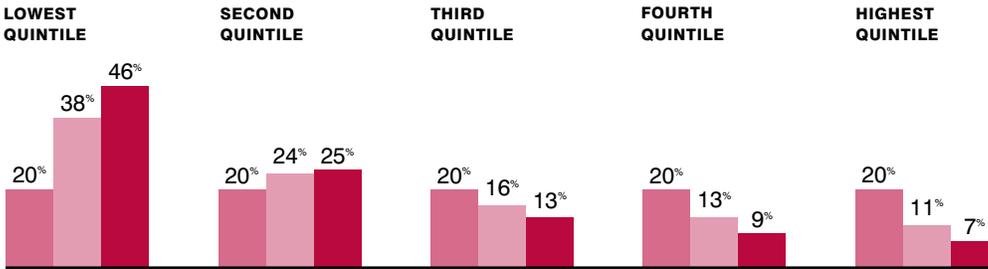
all undergraduates. This pattern was intensified among undergraduate students who were legal permanent residents: 53 percent delayed entry into college after high school (NCES 2004).

Immigrant undergraduates were 23 percent more likely than the general undergraduate population to have at least three risk factors associated with low persistence and attainment in higher education, many of which are characteristic of non-traditional students. For example, immigrant students were 17 percent more likely than undergraduate students in general to attend school part-time. In addition, one-third of immigrant undergraduates support dependents, compared with a little more than a quarter of the overall undergraduate population. These factors can make it difficult for a student to complete a college degree. A particular risk factor for immigrant college students is a lack of proficiency in English,

FIGURE 7

## Distribution by Income Quintiles for Dependent Undergraduates by Immigrant Status, 2003-04

- All Dependent Undergraduates
- Immigrant Dependent Undergraduate Students
- Non-Citizen Dependent Undergraduate Students



SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2003-04 NATIONAL POSTSECONDARY STUDENT AID STUDY

and more than half of all immigrant undergraduates and two-thirds of legal permanent residents indicated that their primary language was not English (NCES 2004).

As noted in the previous chapter, immigrant families often have low incomes, and this pattern holds true among immigrant college students. Immigrant undergraduate students who depend on their parents for financial support face particular financial barriers to gaining access to higher education (FIGURE 7). Dependent immigrant undergraduates were 86 percent more likely than other dependent students to come from the lowest income quintile, and 62 percent of dependent immigrant students were in the two lowest income quintiles. Even more strikingly, 71 percent of dependent legal permanent residents were in the two lowest income quintiles (NCES 2004).

The high level of financial need is reflected in the patterns of financial aid use among immigrant undergraduates. In 2003-04, the average expected family contribution (EFC) for immigrant students was \$6,760, substantially lower than the overall average EFC of \$9,596. This difference was particularly noticeable among permanent residents, for whom the average EFC was only \$5,545. In addition, compared with all undergraduates, immigrant students were more likely to be eligible for Pell Grants: 34 percent of all immigrant undergraduates and 38 percent of permanent residents qualified for these grants, compared with 27 percent of the overall student population. On the other hand, immigrant students were somewhat less likely than the general student population to take out loans (30 percent of immigrants took out loans

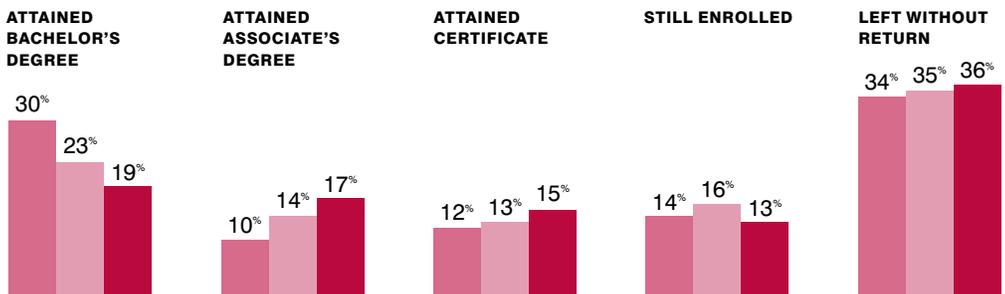
compared with 36 percent of all undergraduates), although the average total loan amount in the two groups was similar. In the end, immigrant students have more unmet need than the overall undergraduate population. The average financial need for immigrant students after deducting all aid was \$3,106, 16 percent higher than the average \$2,576 unmet need for all undergraduates (NCES 2004).

One area in which immigrant status has a significant impact is institutional choice. Immigrants were 14 percent more likely than the general undergraduate population to be enrolled in public two-year institutions and private for-profit institutions—55 percent of all immigrant undergraduates and 59 percent of legal permanent residents were enrolled in these types of institutions (NCES 2004). This enrollment pattern suggests that some of these immigrant students are not necessarily seeking a traditional college degree but rather looking for tangible skills to improve their employment situation. For-profit schools and two-year programs offer a relatively quick turnaround for certification in fields such as electronics and allied health, which currently have a high demand for workers. On the other hand, immigrant students who entered college as freshmen in 1995 were somewhat more likely than the overall undergraduate population to have transferred from a two-year or less school to a four-year school by 2001, and among students who started their education at a four-year institution, immigrants were quite a bit less likely to have transferred to a two-year school (NCES 2001). This transfer pattern suggests relatively high motivation among immigrant students, especially those who begin at four-year schools.

FIGURE 8

## Cumulative Persistence and Attainment for Undergraduate Students Entering College in 1995 by Immigrant Status, 2001

- All Undergraduates
- Immigrant Undergraduates
- Non-Citizen Undergraduates



SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 1995-2001 BEGINNING POSTSECONDARY STUDENT LONGITUDINAL STUDY

These patterns of institutional choice are reflected in the data on persistence and attainment for immigrant students. Five years after entering college in 1995, 27 percent of all immigrant students and 32 percent of permanent residents had attained an associate's degree or certificate, compared with 23 percent of all undergraduates. However, only 23 percent of all immigrant students and 19 percent of permanent residents had earned a bachelor's degree, compared with 30 percent of all undergraduates (FIGURE 8). For the most part, immigrant students had left college without attaining a degree at approximately the same rates as the overall student population, suggesting that the primary difference lies in the type of degree earned rather than the rate of degree completion (NCES 2001).

### Graduate Enrollment Patterns

Immigrants made up approximately 12 percent of graduate students in 2003–04. However, immigrant graduate students were more likely than undergraduates to be naturalized citizens—66 percent of immigrant graduate students were naturalized citizens, compared with 52 percent

of immigrant undergraduates. Immigrant graduate students were also more likely than immigrant undergraduates to be male (NCES 2004).

Like immigrant undergraduates, immigrant graduate students face some challenges. Compared with all graduate students, immigrants were slightly more likely to be in the lowest income quintile. In addition, immigrant graduate students were 18 percent more likely than all graduate students to be supporting dependents, suggesting that the financial strain of graduate school may be a particular challenge for immigrant students. Immigrant graduate students also may face language barriers: 58 percent indicated that English was not their primary language (NCES 2004).

Immigrant students were somewhat more likely than the overall graduate student population to delay entry into graduate school after completing a bachelor's degree. Fifty-two percent of immigrant graduate students delayed entry by at least three years, compared with 48 percent of all graduate students. Once in graduate school, however, immigrant students seem more likely to focus their attention on their education:

## International Students

**International students (those who come to the United States with the express intention of earning a postsecondary degree) are very different from immigrant college students, but they are an important element of the foreign-born population on American college campuses. In 2005–06, international students made up almost 4 percent of U.S. college students. This number represents a stabilization of the international student population after several years of decline. In fact, the number increased by 8 percent over 2004–05, suggesting that the United States may see more international students in the future. While international students come from a wide range of countries, the three countries that send the most students are India, China, and South Korea. Together, they account for more than a third of the international student population (Institute of International Education 2006).**

International undergraduates are different from their immigrant counterparts. Sixty percent of international undergraduates are under age 24, and 55 percent are considered dependent for the purposes of financial aid. Almost half of these students enroll at public or private four-year institutions, with another 39 percent at public two-year institutions. Very few international students attend for-profit institutions. International students are 29 percent more likely than the total undergraduate population to attend school on a full-time basis (NCES 2004).

In terms of financial resources, the parents of dependent international students are better off than the parents of dependent immigrant undergraduates, although they have lower incomes than the parents of the overall dependent student population. However, the parents of international students are better educated than the parents of either of those two groups—over half of the parents of international undergraduates have at least a bachelor's degree (NCES 2004). These high levels of education suggest that the parents of international students are likely to hold high-status and well-paying jobs in their own countries, even if their income is low by U.S. standards. This assumption of financial security

is supported by the fact that international undergraduate students and their families pay 82 percent of their college costs, with the remainder coming primarily from institutional aid (Institute of International Education 2006).

Graduate students make up 45 percent of the international student population (Institute of International Education 2006). Unlike international undergraduates, they receive nearly half their funding from institutional aid, which illustrates the extent to which U.S. graduate programs recruit these students. International students are particularly important to engineering programs; more than a quarter of all international graduate students in 2006 were studying engineering. In the fall of 2006, international graduate student enrollment grew 1 percent, a small increase but an important one, as enrollment for this group had declined 3 percent between 2004 and 2005. As with the international student population in general, the number of new international graduate students increased significantly in 2006, up 12 percent over the previous year (Redd and Neubig 2006).

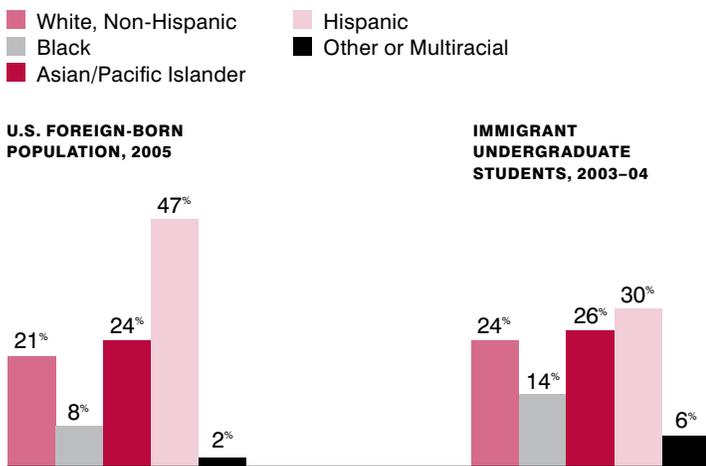
42 percent of immigrant graduate students were enrolled full time, compared with 36 percent of all graduate students. Correspondingly, immigrant graduate students were less likely to work full time: 46 percent compared with 51 percent of all graduate students (NCES 2004).

Immigrant status does not seem to have much impact on the graduate degree a student pursues, although immigrants were slightly more likely than the overall graduate student population to be seeking a doctorate or first professional degree. Institutional choice, on the other hand, is correlated with immigrant status—immigrants are more likely to attend private institutions, both for-profit and non-profit, and less likely to attend public institutions. Almost half of immigrant graduate students (46 percent) were enrolled in private non-profit schools, compared with 42 percent of all graduate students. While the 7 percent of immigrant graduate students enrolled in private for-profit institutions is not a particularly large percentage, only 4 percent of all graduate students attend this type of school (NCES 2004).

The choice of private over public institutions is reflected in the cost and financial aid patterns seen among immigrant graduate students. The average total cost of attendance for these students was \$21,232, more than \$2,500 higher than the \$18,659 average for all graduate students. Immigrant graduate students also received more aid, on average, than the total graduate student population—\$17,372 versus \$15,126. Unlike immigrant undergraduates, immigrant graduate students were more likely to borrow to cover their educational costs. Fifty percent of immigrant graduate students took out student loans, with an average loan of \$18,742. In comparison, 45 percent of all graduate students borrowed, with an average loan of \$16,932 (NCES 2004).

FIGURE 9

### Distribution of U.S. Foreign-Born Population Versus Immigrant Undergraduate Students



SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2003-04 NATIONAL POSTSECONDARY STUDENT AID STUDY; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

### Variations by Race and Ethnicity

As we have already noted, the foreign-born population of the United States is considerably more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity than the overall population. This same diversity is found among immigrant undergraduates, but the distribution of students by race includes some marked differences from that in the general U.S. foreign-born population, reflecting the importance of region of origin to education (FIGURE 9).

In 2005, Black immigrants represented about 8 percent of the total foreign-born population; White immigrants, 21 percent; and Asian and Pacific Islanders, 24 percent. Hispanic immigrants, the largest group at the national level, stood at 47 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b). Among 2003-04 undergraduates, however, the picture looked very different. Black students represented 14 percent of immigrant undergraduates—twice their percentage in the general immigrant population. White immigrants and Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants were slightly over-represented at 24 and 26 percent, respectively. Hispanic immigrants, on the other hand, were extremely underrepresented in the undergraduate population at 30 percent (NCES 2004).

This pattern of variation by race and ethnicity, most notably between Hispanic and Asian students, continues throughout the education pipeline. Among immigrant eighth graders in 1988, 97 percent of Asian students had completed a high school diploma by 1994, two years after the expected date of high school graduation. Only 80 percent of Hispanic students had completed a high school diploma by that time, 5 percent had earned a GED, and 15 percent had neither a diploma nor a GED. It is not surprising that these students show similar patterns in postsecondary enrollment. By 2000, 96 percent of Asian students had attended a postsecondary institution, compared with only 68 percent of Hispanic students (NCES 2000).

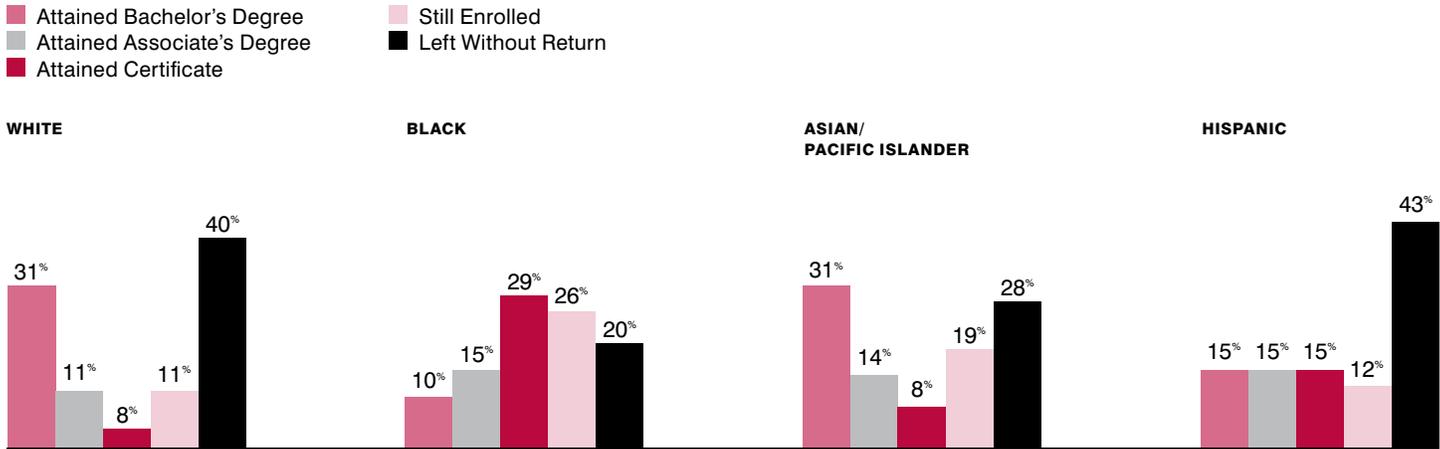
Similar patterns can be seen in college persistence and completion rates. As of 2001, among students who enrolled in college in 1995, 31 percent of White and Asian immigrants had completed bachelor's degrees, while 29 percent of Black immigrants had earned a certificate and 26 percent were still enrolled in school. However, 43 percent of Hispanic immigrants had left school without attaining any degree or certificate (FIGURE 10). While relatively high numbers of Asian and White immigrant students did not complete any degree (28 percent and 40 percent, respectively), the drop-out rate is balanced by these groups' rate of bachelor's degree attainment (NCES 2001). Hispanic immigrants, on the other hand, have high drop-out rates in both high school and college and low rates of postsecondary attainment at all levels, indicating that this group faces particular challenges in obtaining a college degree.

### Black Immigrants

The substantial differences by race and ethnicity reflect the importance of region of origin in influencing educational outcomes for immigrant students. As noted earlier, immigrants vary considerably by region of origin in terms of educational attainment and socioeconomic status. For example, African immigrants are one of the best-educated groups in the United States, holding bachelor's or graduate degrees at rates higher

FIGURE 10

## Cumulative Persistence and Attainment for Immigrant Undergraduate Students Entering College in 1995 by Race/Ethnicity, 2001



SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 1995-2001 BEGINNING POSTSECONDARY STUDENT LONGITUDINAL STUDY

than those of any immigrant group except Asians and well above the rate for the overall U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b). However, the racial category “Black” also includes immigrants from the Caribbean, who typically have substantially lower levels of educational attainment than African immigrants (Butcher 1994). Thus, the category “Black college students” may represent very different family backgrounds.

Among Black immigrant undergraduates in 2003–04, 49 percent had parents who did not go beyond high school. Black immigrants were the most likely of any racial or ethnic group to be considered independent for financial aid purposes. Almost three-quarters of Black immigrant undergraduates were independent students, and 43 percent were age 30 or older. Black immigrant students were also the most likely of any race or ethnic group to be supporting dependents themselves. The average incomes of both independent Black immigrant students and the parents of dependent Black immigrant students were the lowest of any race or ethnic group. On the other hand, 63 percent of Black immigrants spoke English as their primary language, giving them some advantage over non-English speakers (NCES 2004).

These numbers suggest that most Black immigrants have overcome considerable disadvantages in pursuit of a college education. They also help explain the patterns of college completion discussed above, which show that many Black immigrants were still enrolled in school after five years and that, among those who had completed their academic programs, the majority had earned an associate’s degree or certificate rather than a bachelor’s degree (NCES 2001). Given the high number of older students and students supporting dependents, it seems reasonable that many Black immigrants would choose to pursue career-related academic programs and would take longer to complete those programs.

### Asian and White Immigrants

Asian and White immigrants, in general, are better educated and have higher incomes than other immigrant groups. Forty-six percent of the parents of Asian immigrant undergraduates and 47 percent of the parents of White immigrant undergraduates in 2003–04 held a bachelor’s degree or higher, a level of educational attainment well above that for the parents of the overall undergraduate student population. Asian immigrant students are the most likely of any race or ethnic group to be dependent students, and the average income of the parents of Asian dependent immigrant students was \$50,788, second only to the parents of White immigrant students. Independent Asian students had average incomes of \$35,461, again second only to White independent students (NCES 2004).

These demographic patterns help explain why Asian and White immigrants are more likely than students from other groups to have attained a bachelor’s degree after five years. However, these two groups also have relatively large numbers of students who left school without completing a credential. This disparity can be explained, in part, by differences in income (FIGURE 11). For example, among White immigrant undergraduates, 43 percent of students whose incomes (or whose parents’ incomes, for dependent students) were at or above the median for their racial/ethnic group had completed a bachelor’s degree within five years, compared with 18 percent of students whose incomes were below the median. Conversely, 39 percent of White immigrant students with incomes below the median had left college without attaining a credential, while only 27 percent of students with incomes at or above the median had done so.

The pattern was similar for Asian immigrant students. Fifty-four percent of those with incomes at or above the median had completed a bachelor’s degree within five years, compared with 27 percent of students

with incomes below the median. However, there was little difference between lower income and higher income Asian immigrant students for those who left college without completing a degree. In fact, lower income Asian students were more likely than their higher income peers to have completed an associate's degree or certificate or to still be enrolled in college at the end of five years (NCES 2001).

Research suggests that Asian immigrant students, and their parents, have particularly high educational aspirations. For example, in 1988, 81 percent of parents of first-generation Asian eighth graders expected their children to earn at least a bachelor's degree. Similarly, 78 percent of first-generation Asian immigrant eighth graders expected to earn at least a bachelor's degree, and that percentage increased to 87 percent by 1994, two years after high school graduation (Kaufman et al. 1999). Researchers have suggested that these high educational expectations, along with a belief in the value of education and strong support from parents and peers, allow Asian immigrant students to perform as well as or better than native-born students (Kao and Tienda 1995; Fuligni 1997). However, considerable variety exists among Asian immigrants in terms of socioeconomic status and other demographic characteristics. For example, Southeast Asians are substantially more likely than Japanese Americans to be living in poverty (Tseng 2004). These demographic differences correspond to differences in educational attainment, illustrating the fact that not all Asian immigrants have equal access to higher education.

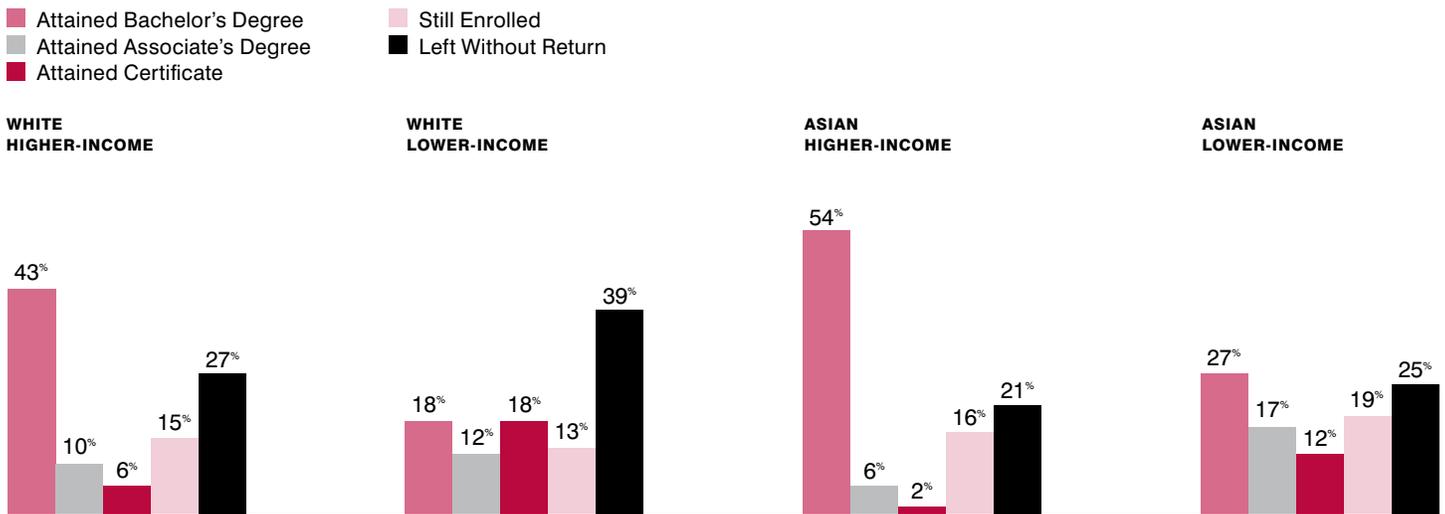
### Hispanic Immigrants

Hispanic immigrants are, in general, at a significant disadvantage in educational attainment compared with other immigrant groups. Among undergraduate students in 2003–04, almost 75 percent of Hispanic immigrants said that English is not their primary language, by far the highest percentage of any race or ethnic group. Parents of these students were also likely to have low educational attainment: 51 percent had a high school diploma or less. The parents of Hispanic dependent immigrant students had relatively low incomes—12 percent lower than the parents of Asian immigrant students and 29 percent lower than the parents of White immigrant students. Hispanic undergraduates were less likely than Black or White immigrants to be independent students, in part because more than half of them are under age 24. However, 37 percent of Hispanic independent students had dependents of their own (NCES 2004).

In addition to these economic challenges, social and cultural factors may contribute to lower educational attainment for Hispanic immigrants. Expectations for educational attainment are lower for Hispanic immigrants than for other immigrant groups. For example, only 41 percent of parents of first-generation Hispanic eighth graders in 1988 expected their children to earn a bachelor's degree (Kaufman et al. 1999). A sense of familial obligation may affect college enrollment among younger Hispanic immigrants. Especially among migrant workers, who do not necessarily intend to remain in the United States, teenagers may work to help support their families. Traditional gender roles also can influence high school completion and college-going behaviors. A study of Latino immigrants in Georgia found that girls saw

FIGURE 11

## Cumulative Persistence and Attainment for Higher- and Lower-Income White, Non-Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander Immigrant Undergraduate Students Entering College in 1995, 2001



NOTE: HIGHER-INCOME STUDENTS WERE AT OR ABOVE THE MEDIAN INCOMES FOR INDEPENDENT STUDENTS AND PARENTS OF DEPENDENT STUDENTS FOR THEIR RESPECTIVE RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS. LOWER-INCOME STUDENTS WERE BELOW THE MEDIAN.  
SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 1995-2001 BEGINNING POSTSECONDARY STUDENT LONGITUDINAL STUDY

## Second-Generation Immigrants

**While this report focuses on college students and prospective college students who are themselves first-generation immigrants, it is important to note generational differences in educational achievement among the larger immigrant student population. Second-generation immigrant students—those who were born in the United States to foreign-born parents—make up a substantial portion of the children of immigrant parents and tend to differ somewhat from their first-generation counterparts.**

Like first-generation immigrant undergraduates, second-generation students are poorer than the general undergraduate population. The parents of dependent second-generation students are 27 percent more likely than the parents of the overall dependent undergraduate population to be in the lowest income quintile. However, they are far less likely to have very low incomes than are the parents of first-generation immigrant students, indicating that generational differences do have an impact on the affordability of postsecondary education (NCES 2004).

Second-generation immigrant undergraduates are younger than their first-generation counterparts—63 percent are under age 24, compared with only 47 percent of first-generation immigrant students—and they are less likely to have delayed entry into college after high school. They are also somewhat more likely than first-generation immigrant students to attend college full time and are much less likely to be supporting dependents of their own, both factors that increase the likelihood of completing a college degree. Most important, 73 percent of second-generation students indicate that English is their primary language, compared with only 45 percent of first-generation immigrant students (NCES 2004).

Unfortunately, not all second-generation students have equal access to and preparation for higher education. As with first-generation immigrant students, a great deal of variation exists across racial and ethnic groups. Several studies have shown that second-generation Asian students who were in the eighth grade in 1988 displayed higher educational

aspirations and higher academic achievement than their first-generation peers and were less likely to drop out of school. Second-generation Hispanic students, however, expressed educational aspirations similar to those of their first-generation peers but were less likely to enroll in a college preparatory program in high school and dropped out of school at the same rate as their first-generation peers. Both groups of Hispanic students had drop-out rates roughly four times higher than the rate for second-generation Asian students (Kao and Tienda 1995; Kaufman et al. 1999). Moreover, while 76 percent of the second-generation Hispanic students had attended a postsecondary institution by 2000, compared with 69 percent of their first-generation peers, these college-going rates were much lower than those of either first- or second-generation Asian immigrant students (NCES 2000).

Some researchers have suggested that second-generation immigrant students are particularly well-placed for educational success. In general, these students have stronger English-language skills than their first-generation peers. They may also have parents who stress the importance of education and benefit from what is sometimes called “immigrant optimism”—the belief that one can get ahead in America through hard work (Kao and Tienda 1995). While this pattern may match the experience of many second-generation immigrants, however, the disparities between Asian and Hispanic immigrant students suggest that even second-generation Hispanic immigrants face certain barriers that reduce their access to and success in higher education.

little need for formal education because they envisioned themselves in primarily domestic roles, while boys believed they did not need a high school diploma or higher education to get good-paying jobs (Bohon, Macpherson, and Atilis 2005).

The portrait of immigrants in American higher education shows that they lag somewhat behind the total U.S. population, especially in terms of earning bachelor's degrees. Students who immigrate to the United States as children have educational attainment rates similar to or better than their native-born peers (Chiswick and DebBurman 2003; U.S. Census Bureau 2005b). However, the many immigrants who arrive here as teenagers or adults face considerable challenges. These challenges are reflected in the fact that many immigrant college students are non-traditional students who have delayed entry into higher education after high school, who attend college part time, and who have dependents of their own. Immigrant students have higher unmet financial need than the average undergraduate and are more likely to enroll in community colleges or private for-profit institutions. While immigrant undergraduates complete college at the same rate as the overall student population, they are more likely to earn certificates or associate's degrees than bachelor's degrees and so may not enjoy the full benefits associated with a college degree.

The portrait of immigrant students contains within it very significant variations according to race and ethnicity, which themselves are correlated with region of origin. Asian immigrant undergraduates are more likely than other racial or ethnic groups to be dependent students, and their parents' educational attainment and incomes are higher than that of any group except White immigrants. Asian and White immigrants are also more likely than other groups to earn bachelor's degrees, although income plays an important role in degree attainment for these groups. Black immigrant undergraduates are especially likely to be nontraditional students—many are over age 30 and support dependents. Black immigrant students also are most likely to earn certificates or associate's degrees. Latino immigrants are particularly underrepresented in higher education and have the highest high school and undergraduate dropout rates, along with low bachelor's degree attainment rates, suggesting that this ethnic group faces particular challenges in gaining access to and succeeding in higher education.

These variations among immigrant groups based on region of origin and age at the time of immigration present challenges for U.S. policymakers who want to increase college enrollment, persistence, and completion rates among immigrants. Immigrant groups vary considerably in their ability to gain access to and succeed in college, and policies designed to offer more postsecondary opportunities for immigrants must address these important differences if they are to provide the types of assistance specific immigrant groups need. ❧

# Immigrants and Higher Education: State Case Studies

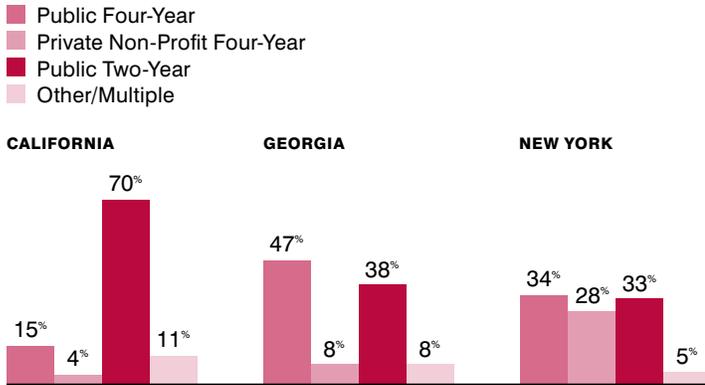
Immigration is a politically charged issue with differential effects across states and regions. Certain immigrant populations are concentrated in specific regions, and some regions are more experienced and better equipped to deal with new immigrants. The West Coast has been a gateway for immigrants from Asia and Latin America. In the Northeast, where immigrants have been arriving in substantial numbers for over a century, the immigrant population is a rich amalgamation of countries, races, and ethnicities. In the South, on the other hand, immigration is a newer and more controversial issue. Southern states are being forced to reassess policies and design infrastructures to support the incoming population, which could be an opportunity to develop innovative ways of incorporating the new wave of immigrants into American society.

We will focus on three states: Georgia, California, and New York. California and New York have been immigrant destinations for many years and have the largest immigrant populations in the country, in terms of total numbers and as a percentage of state population. Almost half (44 percent) of California's foreign-born residents were born in Mexico. In New York, the largest group of immigrants is from the Dominican Republic (11 percent), although several other nations are almost as well represented. Georgia presents yet another picture. It ranks 10th in the size of its foreign-born population and 21st in immigrants as a percentage of total state population, but it experienced a 233 percent increase in immigrants from 1990 to 2000—only North Carolina saw a larger increase in that period (Migration Policy Institute 2005).

We found some thought-provoking differences in the immigrant undergraduate student populations of these three states. In California, 70 percent of immigrant undergraduates were enrolled in community colleges in 2003–04. In Georgia, 85 percent of immigrant students attended public colleges and universities. In New York, immigrant students were much more evenly distributed among institutional types, including private nonprofit universities (**FIGURE 12**). These trends in institutional choice are driven by a variety of factors, including each state's unique system of higher education as well as the demographics of each state's immigrant population. This diversity helps illustrate the extent to which the issue of immigrant access to higher education plays out in very different ways from state to state. These three states provide a diverse picture of state-level challenges and solutions regarding access to higher education for immigrants.

FIGURE 12

## Distribution of Immigrant Undergraduate Students in California, Georgia, and New York by State and Institutional Type, 2003-04



SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2003-04 NATIONAL POSTSECONDARY STUDENT AID SURVEY.

### Georgia

Georgia is one of several southern states in which economic and social trends are increasingly shaped by a growing immigrant population. In 2005, foreign-born residents made up 9 percent of the state's population, but the number of immigrants in the state has increased substantially over the past decade to more than 795,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a). More dramatically, the estimated number of undocumented immigrants in Georgia as of 2005 was 470,000—a population that has more than doubled since 2000 and represents 59 percent of all immigrants in the state (Hoefer, Rytina, and Campbell 2006). Georgia's tipping point for immigration was the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, which created a range of employment opportunities and a need for cheap labor. Many foreign-born residents now come to Georgia for jobs in construction and manufacturing, and the steady stream of immigration does not appear to be slowing (Kochut and Humphreys 2006). Atlanta is a major hub and area of settlement for immigrant workers; the city and its surrounding suburbs are home to immigrants from some 140 countries (Bohon 2006).

In 2005, 47 percent of immigrants in Georgia were Hispanic, 16 percent White, 13 percent Black, and 23 percent Asian (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a). However, this racial and ethnic distribution is not mirrored in the undergraduate immigrant population (FIGURE 13). Hispanic immigrants are significantly less likely than members of other racial and ethnic groups to be enrolled in college. While the state's total immigrant population is 47 percent Hispanic (the same percentage as in the national immigrant population), only 14 percent of Georgia undergraduates in 2003-04 were Hispanic, far below the 30 percent of Hispanic immigrant undergraduates nationally. Black immigrants were the dominant group among immigrant undergraduate students in the state, totaling 35 percent of the immigrant student population, almost three times their percentage of the state's immigrant population (NCES 2004).

These numbers reflect the high numbers of undocumented immigrants in the state, many of whom are Hispanic. They also reflect the state's

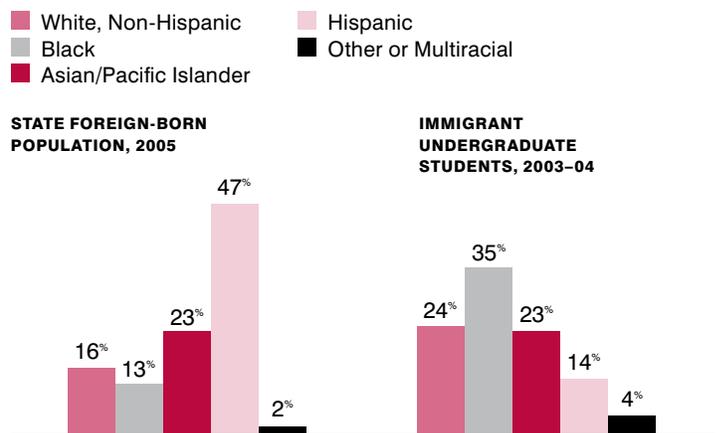
determination to encourage Black students to enroll in college. College recruitment efforts tend to view racial issues from, literally, a Black and White perspective, reflecting Georgia's history of racial segregation. As a result, other populations, particularly Latino immigrants, are often left out of programs aimed at increasing academic preparation and college enrollments (Bohon 2006).

A particular barrier for immigrant students in Georgia is limited access to key educational resources. For example, while state funding is available for ESL programs, not all school districts take advantage of it, and ESL certification is offered at only one university. This means that one university, located in the northern part of the state, is responsible for providing a necessary resource for educators spread out across 150 counties. Limited access to the program keeps many Georgia educators from obtaining ESL certification, which in turn makes it harder for the state to provide teachers who can help immigrant students learn English. Lack of ESL-certified high school teachers in specialized areas such as economics is a particular problem, as these are the classes that often motivate students to consider attending college (Bohon 2006).

Aside from academic concerns, a potential barrier for immigrant students in Georgia is affordability. The average annual cost of college attendance in Georgia is just over \$10,000, slightly below the national average (NCES 2004). Many Georgia students are able to greatly reduce this cost by obtaining a HOPE Scholarship. This merit scholarship program, funded by the state lottery, offers full coverage of tuition and mandatory fees at public colleges and universities, as well as a book allowance, to Georgia high school graduates with at least a B average in core academic classes. Students who attend private institutions in the state are eligible to receive a set dollar amount. All legal permanent residents who graduate from Georgia high schools are eligible for this scholarship (Georgia Student Finance Commission 2006).

FIGURE 13

## Distribution of Georgia Foreign-Born Population versus Georgia Immigrant Undergraduate Students by Race/Ethnicity



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2003-04 NATIONAL POSTSECONDARY STUDENT AID SURVEY

Immigrants who come to Georgia as adults are not eligible to receive the award in their first year of college, but if they earn at least a B average and meet Georgia residency requirements, they can apply to the HOPE program to fund the remainder of their studies. Non-traditional immigrant students are also eligible for the HOPE grant program, which covers tuition and fees for state residents enrolled in technical diploma and certificate programs at state colleges and universities and which requires no minimum grade point average (Georgia Student Finance Commission 2006).

The HOPE Scholarship is a valuable benefit for some immigrant college students in Georgia—those who have graduated from Georgia high schools with high grades. However, the program has had some unintended consequences for the state. The popularity of the program has led to increasing selectivity at the state's public universities, because it tends to keep the highest performing students at in-state schools. These institutions are now more competitive and have higher admissions standards. This situation, in turn, makes it more difficult for immigrant students from low-performing secondary schools to meet the academic standards required to gain admission to state universities. As elsewhere in the United States, immigrants in Georgia tend to be poor and clustered in low-performing schools, and many are already at a disadvantage academically because of the need to learn English (Bohon 2006).

Recent state legislation has raised another barrier for immigrants in Georgia. In March 2006, the state legislature passed the Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act (SB529). In the initial version of this legislation, state colleges and universities would have been barred from enrolling undocumented students. This rider was dropped from the bill before its passage, but the law will require postsecondary institutions to verify the citizenship status of each student at the onset of each term. Although they are permitted to enroll, students who are not legal immigrants are barred from receiving in-state tuition at public colleges and universities whereas, in the past, at least some institutions had offered in-state tuition to undocumented students who met state residency requirements (Kantrowitz 2006). Critics of the bill argue that this is a dangerous move for a state whose economy is increasingly reliant on immigrant laborers, many of whom are undocumented. Limiting access to education seriously impedes upward mobility and consequently deters potential immigrants, documented and undocumented alike, from settling in the state (Associated Press 2006).

While this legislation reflects state policymakers' emphasis on the serious problem of undocumented immigrants, positive changes regarding education for immigrants are occurring in Georgia at the local level. For example, the state is now offering ESL programs for adult immigrants at nearly two dozen technical and state colleges. In its fifth year, Georgia's English Literacy/Civics and Citizenship Education Program offers funding for programs that promote language acquisition, civics education, and the development of the skills necessary to be a productive member of American society (Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education 2006). In an innovative effort, a local school system with a student population that is 60 percent Hispanic tried to counter a lack of Spanish-speaking teachers by setting up a cooperative program that brought graduates from the University of Monterrey in Mexico to work as teacher aides (Bohon 2006).

The barriers described above are reflected in the fact that Georgia's immigrant undergraduate population varies from national trends in several ways. In 2003–04, almost two-thirds of immigrant undergraduates in Georgia were considered independent for financial aid purposes, compared with just over half of immigrant undergraduates nationwide. These students were also more likely to be naturalized U.S. citizens and to have delayed enrollment in college for at least ten years after high school. The picture these numbers paint is of a group of older, well-established immigrants who have been in the United States long enough to become naturalized citizens (NCES 2004). More recent immigrants, including the enormous wave of Latino and undocumented immigrants over the past decade, are less likely to be enrolled in college in Georgia. As immigration to the state continues, policymakers will have to find ways to offer higher education to these newer immigrants, or the state will risk finding itself with a poorly educated workforce and unable to meet its economic needs.

### California

California's foreign-born population—9.6 million in 2005—is the largest in the nation, and an estimated 2.8 million (29 percent) of these residents were undocumented (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a; Hoefer, Rytina, and Campbell 2006). About 30 percent of California's immigrant population is Asian and Pacific Islander, and 54 percent is Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a). The majority of Hispanic immigrants (almost 44 percent of the immigrant population as a whole) came to California from Mexico; the remainder came primarily from Central America (Migration Policy Institute 2006). Each county in the state is a receiver for this rapidly growing immigrant community (Hill 2006). The flow of immigration into California is facilitated by the state's geography. The state shares a border with Mexico and has a number of major ports, making it easily accessible for immigrants coming from overseas.

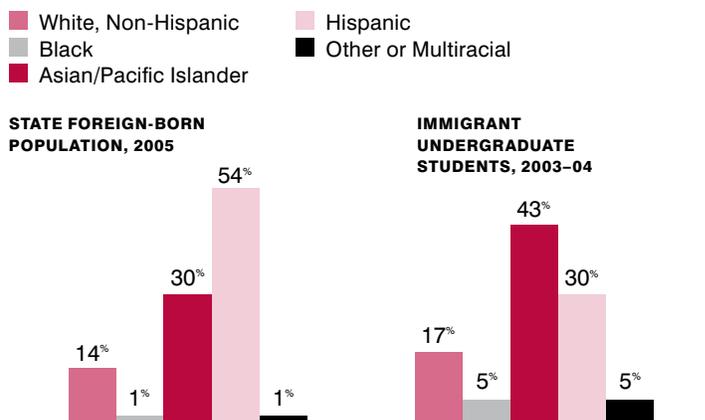
As in Georgia, the population of immigrant undergraduate students in California does not reflect the racial and ethnic distribution of the overall immigrant population (FIGURE 14). In 2003–04, Hispanic students made up 30 percent of immigrant undergraduates, a percentage similar to the nation as a whole, although 54 percent of immigrants in California were Hispanic. Asians, who made up about 30 percent of the state's immigrant population, were, at 43 percent, significantly overrepresented among immigrant undergraduates (NCES 2004).

Disparities in college enrollment based on race and ethnicity have been the subject of considerable debate in California. The passage in 1996 of Proposition 209, which banned the use of race as a criterion for admission to the state's public universities, led to a drop in the entry rate of Hispanic students at both the University of California and California State University systems. While entry rates for Hispanic students have increased slightly in recent years, they have not kept pace with the increasing number of Hispanic high school graduates who are qualified to enter the state systems.<sup>9</sup> In 2003, nearly half of Asian high school graduates qualified to enter the California State University system and

<sup>9</sup> Students qualify for admittance into the University of California or California State University systems on the basis of high school grade point average, entrance exam score, and completion of state-mandated high school course requirements.

FIGURE 14

## Distribution of California Foreign-Born Population versus California Immigrant Undergraduate Students by Race/Ethnicity



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2003-04 NATIONAL POSTSECONDARY STUDENT AID SURVEY

almost a third were eligible for the University of California system. The comparable numbers for Hispanic high school graduates were 16 percent and less than 7 percent (California Postsecondary Education Commission 2005). These numbers include native-born students as well as immigrants who graduate from California high schools, but they illustrate the extent to which race and ethnicity play a significant role in access to higher education in California.

One result of this situation is that immigrant students in California characteristically enroll at community colleges. In 2003-04, about 70 percent of all immigrant undergraduates were pursuing degrees at public two-year institutions, compared with 62 percent of non-immigrants in the state. In addition, 57 percent of immigrant undergraduates in California were attending college only part time, compared with 50 percent of non-immigrants in California and 41 percent of immigrant undergraduates nationally (NCES 2004). Community colleges are an obvious choice for many immigrant students in California—they offer low tuition and fees, open admissions, and programs that target language acquisition and workforce development.

California's four-year public institutions, on the other hand, are quite competitive in terms of admissions. In accordance with the state's master plan for education, the University of California system admits only students from the top 12.5 percent of their high school class, and the California State University system only accepts those from the top third. Additionally, students must complete specific requirements to qualify for admission at a four-year state institution. A student's eligibility index is determined by high school grade point average, entrance exam scores, and completion of state-mandated high school course requirements. This rigid system can create problems for immigrants, who are often clustered in low-income areas with low-performing high schools, and who may not be aware of the steps they need to take to gain admission to a state university (Haberman and Orland 2006; Hill 2006). Despite these barriers, however, 55 percent of students in the University of California system in 2004 had at least one immigrant parent or were immigrants themselves (Burdman 2004).

To help improve access to state four-year institutions, organizations in California are supporting outreach and early intervention programs, which attempt to remedy the low enrollment rates among disadvantaged state residents, including immigrants. For example, since its conception in 1981, California's Puente "Bridge" Project has sought to improve college enrollment and completion rates for the state's Hispanic residents. This program, sponsored by the University of California and the California Community College System, and offered at 35 high schools and 60 community colleges (the latter in hopes of increasing transfer rates to four-year schools), has a simple but powerful goal: reaching students who would otherwise not pursue a college degree. The Puente Project is credited with increasing enrollment rates at four-year colleges and improving degree completion rates for Hispanic and other minority populations (Puente Project 2003).

Although the Puente Project is open to all disadvantaged groups, immigrants benefit greatly from the program, and program evaluations

suggest that immigrant students who participate have high transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions. The program provides mentoring and community involvement to educate students about the state's higher education system. More important, the Puente Project informs disadvantaged students, including immigrants, that vocational programs are not their only option and that college degrees, especially bachelor's degrees, can be a key to success in life (Puente Project 2003). This notion is important because some observers suggest that California immigrants are pushed by public schools and community leaders into low-wage and technical career paths (Perez 2006).

In addition to inadequate academic preparation, immigrant undergraduates face the barrier of not being able to afford higher education in California. In 2003-04, immigrant students paid less tuition than non-immigrants, a result of their disproportionate enrollment in low-cost community colleges, but, as in the case with national data, they needed more financial aid because they typically come from poorer families (NCES 2004). If a student has lived in California for over a year and intends to remain in the state, he or she is eligible for in-state tuition at public colleges and universities. Undocumented residents are also eligible for in-state tuition if they attended high school in the state for at least three years and meet college admission standards. Unlike legal permanent residents, however, undocumented immigrants are not eligible for a Cal Grant, California's extensive grant program for low-income state residents, and they cannot receive the Board of Governors fee waivers offered to low-income students at community colleges. In addition, non-traditional students who are undocumented must pay out-of-state tuition. This requirement is a significant burden, as the out-of-state cost per credit hour at a California community college is \$135, compared with \$26 for in-state tuition (Haberman and Orland 2006). Given these financial disparities and the high percentage of undocumented residents in the state, California policymakers are particularly concerned about higher education access for these immigrants, although they acknowledge that even legal immigrants face significant

barriers related to academic preparation and lack of information about the higher education system.

### New York

New York has one of the largest immigrant populations in the United States, with almost 4 million foreign-born residents making up 21 percent of the state's population in 2005. Almost three-quarters of these immigrants live in New York City, where they make up 37 percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a). New York has a smaller proportion of undocumented immigrants than Georgia and California do. Estimates indicate that approximately 560,000 undocumented immigrants live in the state, representing only about 14 percent of the overall immigrant population.

In terms of race and ethnicity, New York immigrants are more varied than those in California or Georgia. In 2005, 31 percent were Hispanic, 26 percent White, 23 percent Asian, and 19 percent Black. This relatively even distribution is mirrored in the state's immigrant undergraduates as well (FIGURE 15). In 2003–04, each major racial or ethnic group made up 20–25 percent of undergraduate students. Hispanics were underrepresented among immigrant undergraduates compared with their percentage of the overall immigrant population, but the extent of the underrepresentation was not as great as in California or Georgia (NCES 2004). Research suggests, however, that within the Hispanic community in New York City, country of origin plays an important role in access to higher education, with immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Central and South America enrolling in college at higher rates than immigrants from Mexico (Leinbach and Bailey 2006).

Although the median age of immigrants in New York is higher than the national median, immigrant undergraduates in the state are more likely to be traditional-age college students. In 2003–04, 54 percent of immigrant undergraduates in New York were under age 24, and just under half were classified as dependent students (compared with national rates of 47 percent and 40 percent, respectively). Fifty-five percent of these students were attending school full-time, compared with only 43 percent nationally. However, these undergraduates came from very disadvantaged backgrounds. Almost half had parents with no more than a high school education, compared with 42 percent of immigrant undergraduates nationally, and 76 percent of dependent New York immigrant undergraduates came from families that had incomes in the two lowest income percentiles, compared with 61 percent of all dependent immigrant students (NCES 2004).

Despite having low incomes and less well-educated parents, immigrants in New York are more likely to pursue an education at a four-year institution (which is also true of the general population of college students in the state). Whereas nationally only 36 percent of immigrant undergraduates were enrolled in four-year schools in 2003–04, almost 62 percent of New York immigrant undergraduates were attending four-year institutions. This disparity was particularly noticeable with regard to private nonprofit four-year schools: 28 percent of immigrant students in New York attended these schools, compared with 12 percent nationwide. The higher level of enrollment in four-year institutions can be explained

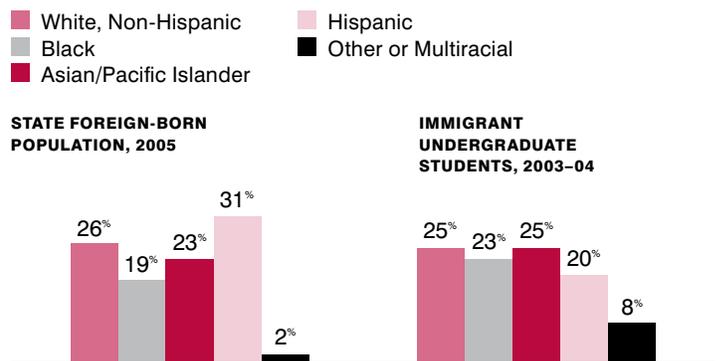
in part by the state's generous financial aid programs. Almost half of immigrant undergraduates in New York during the 2003–04 academic year received state grants averaging close to \$2,600. Nationally, only 17 percent of immigrant undergraduates received state grants, and these grants averaged just under \$2,200. In general, immigrant college students in New York were more likely to have received financial aid, and that aid was higher than the national average, reflecting the higher tuition paid by students in the state. Much of this aid was in the form of grants, including federal grant aid, which increases with the cost of attendance: 70 percent of immigrant undergraduates in New York received some grant aid, with an average total of over \$5,600. In the United States as a whole, only 52 percent of immigrant undergraduates received grant aid, and the average amount was just over \$4,000 (NCES 2004).

New York has made efforts to reduce barriers to higher education for undocumented immigrants. As in California, undocumented students are eligible to pay in-state tuition under certain circumstances. New York requires that undocumented students enroll in college within five years after graduating from a New York high school that they attended for at least two years (or after completing a GED in New York) and that they file an affidavit stating that they will apply for legal immigration status (Rhymer 2005). Currently, the New York legislature is considering a bill that would allow undocumented immigrants access to the state's Tuition Assistance Program, which would increase access to higher education for undocumented students (Jimenez and Lee 2006).

Organizations in New York offer a variety of programs aimed at increasing immigrant access to higher education access. For example, the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) sponsors an early intervention program for high school sophomores that aims to get immigrant students thinking about college at an early age. The program provides students with mentors who guide them through the process of applying to college and help them deal with circumstances unique to their status as immigrants. NYIC also assesses state and local policies on ESL instruction at the K–12 level;

FIGURE 15

### Distribution of New York Immigrant Undergraduate Students versus Georgia Immigrant Undergraduate Students by Race/Ethnicity



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2003–04 NATIONAL POSTSECONDARY STUDENT AID SURVEY

advocates for immigrant parents who have difficulty communicating with their children's schools; and monitors city and state legislation concerning immigrant rights, including access to higher education (Jimenez and Lee 2006). Another early intervention program that benefits immigrants in New York City is College Now, a partnership between the New York City public schools and the City University of New York (CUNY). This program allows students to take free college courses while still enrolled in high school. Although students must meet CUNY's admissions requirements to take credit courses, remedial courses are also available. In 2003–04, 31 percent of the students who participated in this program were not native speakers of English (Lerner and Brand 2006).

CUNY plays a particularly important role in access to higher education for immigrants. The university takes pride in its diverse student population and its record enrollment and retention rates for immigrants. In 2000, 49 percent of first-time freshmen were foreign-born, a percentage higher than the percentage of foreign-born persons in the overall New York City population. These immigrant students were more likely to be enrolled in community colleges—55 percent of freshmen at CUNY's community colleges were foreign-born, compared with 44 percent of those at four-year colleges (Leinbach and Bailey 2006). Foreign-born students who began their education at CUNY community colleges in 1990 outperformed native-born students on every measure of academic success. Immigrant students were more likely to earn at least 60 credits, to receive an associate's degree, and to transfer to a bachelor's degree program (Bailey and Weininger 2002).

Because of CUNY's diversity, many of its campuses offer programs to help immigrant students. At LaGuardia Community College in Queens, for example, immigrant students make up 60 percent of the student body, represent 150 different countries, and speak about 110 different languages. LaGuardia's Center for Immigrant Education and Training offers noncredit ESL and civics classes as well as job training programs designed to help immigrants improve their English and move up in their field of work. While these programs are not postsecondary education, LaGuardia staff use the opportunity of contact with immigrants to encourage them to enroll in credit classes and seek a degree. The school's College Prep Program holds on- and off-campus workshops intended to help students understand the American higher education system and move from noncredit to degree-granting programs (Blaber 2006). Throughout the CUNY system, other programs assist immigrant students. These students can, for example, go to one of five legal services centers for free counseling on immigration or other legal issues (Jimenez and Lee 2006).

CUNY offers a variety of ESL programs, including courses for students who are enrolled in degree programs. Students whose English is not yet adequate and who may not be fully prepared academically for college-level classes are referred to the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP), created in 1996 and now offered at nine CUNY campuses. This non-credit program uses "sustained content-based teaching" to teach English language skills through the arts, humanities, and sciences. Along with language immersion, CLIP helps students gain technology, research, and study skills, and learn more about citizenship requirements and the

American higher education system. Guest speakers and field trips help students explore career paths and feel more confident about and entitled to benefit from the resources available in New York City. Students attend class 25 hours a week for one academic year, and most transfer to degree programs at various CUNY campuses, where they may take additional ESL or remedial English classes. All high school graduates are eligible for the program, which is heavily subsidized by CUNY to keep fees low. The intent of this program is to address the needs of a city with many immigrants and to develop better prepared entering students for CUNY. Despite initial concerns about the program from administrators and city officials, its excellent track record has made it a model for improving college access for immigrants (Makloufi 2006).

Many of the students who enroll in CLIP are older, working adults with families, and most have been in the United States for a year or more. Attending a CUNY college is an ideal option for these students, because the many campuses are close to their homes and workplaces. However, the immigrants enrolled in CLIP are a select group who are eager to go to college. Recruitment is largely based on word of mouth, and to qualify for the program, students must take CUNY's placement exam and apply for admission (Makloufi 2006). Immigrants with no support network are less likely to hear about the program or attempt the CUNY entrance exam. In addition, the New York Immigration Coalition has reported that CUNY's mandatory skills testing may have contributed to a decline in immigrant enrollment at the system's four-year colleges, suggesting that access to bachelor's degrees may be more of a challenge for immigrant students (New York Immigration Coalition 2002).

While CUNY's programs for immigrant students are extensive and reasonably well funded, other areas in the state have fewer programs available to immigrants. Immigrant students, especially those who are undocumented, often have a harder time enrolling in community colleges in these areas, because college staff lack knowledge about immigration and documentation requirements. Consequently, immigrants who would be eligible for CUNY programs may be turned away from these community colleges. For example, one undocumented student attempted to enroll in a nursing program that, if completed, would have allowed her to adjust her immigration status. She would have been eligible for this program at CUNY but was not allowed to enroll at a community college on Long Island. New York, like many other states, faces a shortage of nurses. This barrier meant that a prospective nursing student was turned away from a postsecondary program that would have helped her become a valuable contributor to the workforce in her state (Jimenez and Lee 2006).

Although it still faces many challenges, New York stands as an exemplar for improving access to higher education for immigrants. In particular, the CUNY system—with its variety of programs for immigrants at every stage of education—shows that support programs, combined with adequate financial assistance, make it possible for immigrant students to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education. As more states become home to new waves of immigrants, they can look to New York for ways to ensure that these new residents gain access to the education they need to contribute effectively to the state's economic growth. ❧

# Conclusions and Policy Implications

In this report we have illustrated the complexity of the issue of immigrant access to higher education in the United States. Data show that immigrants in general have lower levels of educational attainment than the U.S. population as a whole and that traditional-age immigrants are less likely to be enrolled in college than their native-born peers. Immigrant college students, who made up 12 percent of U.S. undergraduates in 2003–04, are more likely than the general undergraduate population to be nontraditional students and to enroll in community colleges and for-profit institutions. Immigrant students are less likely than the average undergraduate to earn a bachelor’s degree. These findings illustrate the extent to which structural barriers—including work and family responsibilities, financial need, lack of knowledge of the American higher education system, inadequate academic preparation, and limited English proficiency—can hinder immigrants from enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education. An immigrant student from El Salvador said, “We really want to have a degree. We want to study. But if we don’t have the possibilities, then we stop.”

Combating these barriers will present a considerable challenge to policymakers, as they affect immigrant students at every stage in the college pipeline. Some changes to federal policy would certainly be beneficial. For example, passage of the DREAM Act would increase college access for younger undocumented students, many of whom have lived in this country for most of their lives. Making legal permanent residents eligible for the Academic Competitiveness Grants and the National Science and Math Access to Retain Talent (SMART) Grants, which are currently limited to U.S. citizens, would open college doors for many low-income immigrants. The federal government could also provide additional fund-

ing for ESL classes through adult education grants to states and could explicitly recognize immigrant students as a target population for its TRIO programs, including offering training in immigrant issues to TRIO staff. The TRIO programs, which attempt to reduce non-financial barriers to higher education access and success, are aimed at low-income students and those whose parents did not attend college, a population that includes many immigrant students. With funding in excess of \$800 million a year, the TRIO programs can offer an effective way for the federal government to address the needs of this student population (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education 2006).

The data presented in this report indicate that citizenship is associated with higher levels of participation in postsecondary education. One way the federal government can help immigrants overcome barriers to higher education is to provide a broader and more efficient path to citizenship for immigrants who intend to stay in the United States. Currently, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), a division of the Department of Homeland Security, has a significant backlog in processing applications for asylum, permanent residency, and naturalization. While this backlog has been reduced in recent years, security concerns and outdated technology make the road to citizenship a slow one for immigrants (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2005). Moreover, the federal government has recently proposed increasing immigration application fees by more than 80 percent. This proposal, if it takes effect, could create a significant financial burden for low-income immigrants as they try to become legal permanent residents or naturalized citizens (Hsu and Fears 2007). By keeping immigration fees low, providing adequate funding for USCIS, and offering more opportunities for undocumented residents to adjust their immigration status, the federal government can help immigrants become citizens and increase their access to higher education.

For the most part, however, crucial policy changes and the development of new programs will have to come at the state, local, and institutional levels. Moreover, as this report has shown, immigrants vary considerably in their access to and success in postsecondary education by region of origin and age at the time of immigration. Thus, policymakers will have to consider which immigrant group's needs they are trying to address

with each policy or program. Policies and programs tailored to the needs of Latino immigrants and immigrants who come to America as teenagers are particularly essential if these groups are to gain access to the benefits of higher education.

### **At-Risk Immigrant Groups**

Research shows that immigrants who arrive in America before the age of 13 have educational outcomes similar to those of their native-born peers (Chiswick and DebBurman 2003; Hill 2006). On the other hand, immigrants who arrive as teenagers are at risk when it comes to education. These young people have very high drop-out rates from high school, especially if they were not continuously enrolled in school before they immigrated (Fry 2005). Immigrants who arrive in America between the ages of 13 and 19 years have one of the lowest rates of educational attainment of any immigrant group (Chiswick and DebBurman 2003). For these young immigrants, the challenge of making the transition to adulthood and, at the same time, learning a new language and culture may make the prospect of college seem unrealistic.

Efforts to improve access to higher education for this group must begin in the high schools. Expanded and retooled ESL programs are a necessity if students are to complete a college preparatory program while also learning English. Too often, ESL students are placed in less academically demanding classes simply because of their English skills, which means they may not graduate from high school prepared for college-level work and they may lose interest in school because they are not sufficiently challenged. To help avoid this problem, high

schools must make a coordinated effort to better integrate and educate immigrant students. Potentially valuable reforms include extending the school day or year for limited English proficiency students to allow more time for both ESL and content instruction; actively involving immigrant students in extracurricular activities; and providing immigrant students with information on college preparation and admissions. Efforts must also be made to develop curricula and teaching methods to help the limited English proficiency high school students who come to the United States late in their teen years or unprepared for high school coursework (Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix 2000).

One alternative that addresses these concerns is the “newcomer” high school program, in which newly arrived immigrant students with limited English proficiency enroll until they are ready to pursue regular classes. Newcomer programs can be either separate entities or small learning communities within the high school, and students remain in the program for a limited period, usually 6–18 months. In addition to ESL instruction, these programs may offer literacy instruction in the student’s native language, and bilingual or sheltered English instruction in core subjects such as math, science, history, and social studies to help ensure that students are prepared for grade-level work when they transfer to a regular high school.<sup>9</sup> Newcomer high school programs also help students become familiar with American society and culture, and provide access to social services as needed. The intent of such programs, which are most commonly found in cities with high rates of immigration, is to acculturate immigrant students and provide ESL instruction in a safe and supportive environment (Short 1988).

Unfortunately, because immigrant families tend to be poor, the schools in which their children are enrolled are the least likely to offer the sort of assistance that teenage immigrants need. Early intervention programs and college admissions counseling tailored for immigrant students could play a role in filling this gap. State-funded programs such as California’s Puente Project or privately funded ones like the New York Immigration Coalition’s early intervention program offer opportunities for immigrant students to obtain tutoring or other academic assistance, to learn about the benefits of higher education, to gain access to necessary information about college admissions and financial aid, and to see themselves as potential college students. In many cases, as with the Puente Project, existing programs that were not specifically designed to help immigrant students have had a beneficial effect for these students.

It is important to note, however, that teenage immigrants, like other immigrant groups, are not homogenous. Region of origin, in particular,

<sup>9</sup> In the sheltered English teaching method, instructors use a range of techniques such as visual aids, repetition, and group learning strategies to help limited English proficiency students understand course content (Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix 2000).

plays a crucial role in educational attainment. In California, for example, Asian immigrants who come to the United States after age 13 complete high school and enroll in college at rates higher than those of native-born Asian students. Young Latino immigrants, on the other hand, have substantially lower rates of educational attainment, in part because many come to America specifically to find work (Hill 2006). These young immigrants, who may not have a high school diploma, will need very different forms of outreach and assistance if they are ever to enroll in college. Combined GED/ESL programs or college outreach at employer-sponsored job training programs (such as the one offered at LaGuardia Community College’s Center for Immigrant Education and Training) might be effective ways to reach this group.

The challenges faced by young Latino immigrants in California reflect the fact that the Hispanic immigrant population as a whole is particularly disadvantaged when it comes to gaining access to higher education. Throughout the education pipeline, the barriers described in this report seem to have a disproportionate impact on this group. Latino immigrants—especially those from Mexico and Central America—are more likely than other immigrants to drop out before completing high school, even if they immigrated to the United States during childhood (Kaufman et al. 1998; Fry 2005). Among immigrants age 18 to 24, Hispanics are three to four times

## Efforts to improve access to higher education for [immigrants] must begin in the high schools.

less likely than immigrants from other regions to be enrolled in college (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b). Latino immigrants are underrepresented in the undergraduate student population both nationally and in all three states we studied, all of which have large or growing Hispanic immigrant populations (NCES 2004). Latino immigrant students also have a low rate of bachelor’s degree completion and are more likely than immigrants from other regions to leave school without completing any credential (NCES 2001). These facts, taken in combination, paint a picture of an immigrant group for whom college access and success remain significant challenges.

Because Latinos are the largest and fastest growing immigrant population in America, it is essential that their educational needs be addressed. Some policy efforts have already been made. The President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans issued a report in 2003 recommending, among other things, that the federal government develop a national public awareness campaign to increase college awareness and educational attainment among Hispanic Americans. Such a campaign has potential to help Latino immigrants, as well as native-born citizens, but only if it targets Spanish-language media outlets in areas with substantial or increasing immigrant populations and tailors the information to the specific concerns of immigrants. For example, the pilot public awareness program cited in the report launched a bilingual Web site, [YesICan.gov/YoSiPuedo.gov](http://YesICan.gov/YoSiPuedo.gov), intended to provide key educational information to Hispanic Americans. However, the Web

site has no link that specifically addresses issues of importance to immigrants, such as eligibility for various types of financial aid, and no link to assist non-traditional prospective college students. These omissions make the site less valuable to adult Latino immigrants who are seeking a college education for themselves rather than for their children.

The Advisory Commission's report also emphasized the importance of action by postsecondary institutions to increase college enrollment and retention for Latino students. Possible strategies include aggressive recruitment of Latino students by colleges and universities, outreach to Hispanic communities to raise awareness of financial aid opportunities, development of retention strategies to reduce the number of Latino students who leave college without a degree, and expanded articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions to increase the number of Latino students who complete bachelor's degrees (President's Advisory Commission 2003). These strategies—if they are promoted by postsecondary institutions that serve communities with large or expanding populations of Latino immigrants—could be of great value in increasing college access for this immigrant group. In southern states with burgeoning populations of Latino immigrants, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, many of which are facing smaller pools of Black students in their states, can also play a vital role in serving Latino immigrant students. For example, Fayetteville State University in North Carolina has hired an admissions counselor who specializes in outreach to the Latino community and has translated its admissions materials into Spanish (Roach 2004).

Because the problem of low educational attainment affects the Latino community as a whole, it is being addressed by policymakers, education officials, and community leaders. Separating the educational needs of Latino immigrants from those of the greater Hispanic community is a challenging process and one that may not be entirely necessary, although research suggests that Latino immigrants are at even greater risk educationally than native-born Hispanic citizens. In the CUNY system, for example, Hispanic students in general showed lower educational outcomes than members of other racial and ethnic groups, but Hispanic immigrants had the lowest rates of bachelor's degree attainment of any group, immigrant or not (Leinbach and Bailey 2006). However, policies and programs developed to increase educational attainment in the Hispanic community as a whole are likely to have a beneficial impact on immigrants too, provided they address nontraditional students as well as K–12 students and their families.

### **General Policy and Program Needs**

Not all immigrants face the same barriers in gaining access to higher education. In fact, many of the barriers immigrants confront are similar to those faced by all low-income and/or first-generation college students in the United States, so policies intended to benefit that population as a whole will also help immigrants (Louie 2005). However, certain barriers have a particular impact on many immigrants, regardless of their background and resources. The most obvious of these are limited English proficiency and a lack of familiarity with the American higher education system. Policies and programs that address these two barriers have the potential for the widest impact in increasing higher education access for immigrants.

Immigrants who arrive in the United States as children have the opportunity to learn English through publicly funded programs in K–12 schools, although these programs, especially those in high schools, are often not adequate to the needs of this expanding population. Older immigrants face greater challenges in learning English, but a command of the language is necessary to become an American citizen, find better job opportunities, start a business, or simply function easily in day-to-day life. Immigrants who held professional positions in their native countries may be obliged to take low-paying jobs in the United States if their English is inadequate for work in their fields (Kaneya 2004). Without a solid grasp of English, immigrants who wish to pursue higher education will find it difficult to enroll and succeed in college-level classes.

For many immigrants, affordable and accessible ESL classes can make all the difference in building a comfortable life in their new country and can be the first step toward a college education. However, even in cities such as New York and Chicago, which offer a wide range of ESL programs, the demand for classes outstrips the supply (New York Immigration Coalition 2001; Kaneya 2004). The South has the lowest percentage of community colleges that offer ESL classes (21 percent, compared with 40 percent in every other region), but immigrant populations are increasing at the fastest rate in the South (Kuo 1999). Increases in federal, state, and local funding for ESL classes—whether offered by community colleges or nonprofit organizations—would allow more immigrants to improve their English skills. These classes should be targeted to the geographic areas and immigrant communities where they are most needed (New York Immigration Coalition 2001). In particular, areas with low immigrant participation in higher education should be the sites for increased ESL funding.

Community colleges play a particularly important role in providing access to higher education for immigrants. For many new immigrants, especially those with limited proficiency in English, community colleges offer the obvious route to higher education. As a result of this demand, community colleges, particularly those in areas with substantial immigrant populations, tend to offer extensive ESL programs. This is a relatively recent development. In 1975, only 26 percent of community colleges offered ESL classes; by 1998, 55 percent did (Kuo 1999). Community college ESL programs serve not only degree-seeking students but also the wider community, providing an opportunity for adult immigrants who might not have considered pursuing higher education to take classes on a college campus and be exposed to the American higher education system. This process can be enhanced by programs, such as LaGuardia Community College's College Program, that reach out to non-credit ESL students and offer assistance in enrolling in degree programs. Additional state and local funding to support ESL programs and other programs aimed at immigrants will be a necessary investment in states with rapidly growing immigrant populations.

At the postsecondary institutional level, research suggests that immigrant students are not seen by many administrators as a population in need of special services other than ESL classes (Gray, Rolph, and Melamid 1996). However, colleges and universities can help degree-seeking immigrant students by ensuring that admissions counselors

are familiar with their specific concerns (which may be different than those of international students), including regulations on immigration status and in-state tuition or other forms of financial aid and the process of transcript review for students with foreign high school diplomas or college transcripts. At colleges and universities that serve large immigrant populations, it would be helpful to have bilingual or multilingual counselors who are familiar with foreign secondary and postsecondary educational systems and can specialize in assisting immigrant students. Many immigrant students may not be aware of the services available to them, so colleges might institute orientation sessions specifically aimed at immigrant students or have counselors work closely with ESL instructors (Szelenyi and Chang 2002). Mentoring programs and associations for immigrant students can help them make connections with other students with whom they share common experiences and can allow more experienced immigrant students to act as role models.

For many immigrant students, the transition into college can be very challenging. Programs that provide support for these students as they begin their postsecondary studies can smooth the transition. The CUNY Language Immersion Program, which offers instruction in English and college counseling, is an example of a program designed specifically for immigrants (Blaber 2006; Makloufi 2006). However, immigrant students can also take advantage of transitional programs that serve a more general population. For example, the Bridge-to-College Program at Dorcas Place Adult and Family Learning Center in Providence, Rhode Island, allows students to take a free credit course at a local community college while receiving college counseling, tutoring, and peer support. Although it is open to all low-income, first-generation, college-bound students, the program attracts many immigrant students and could provide a model for similar programs in other areas (Dorcas Place 2006). Cities and states with large immigrant populations can support higher education access for these new residents by funding such programs.

Because a lack of understanding of the American higher education system is a fundamental barrier that can prevent immigrants from gaining access to postsecondary education, outreach to immigrant communities is an essential strategy for states, cities, and postsecondary institutions. While outreach to K–12 school and immigrant parents is an important part of any effort to increase college access, potential immigrant college students are often older, nontraditional students who are unlikely to be reached by school-based outreach efforts. Media-based outreach campaigns are one option to reach them, but such campaigns must be targeted to specific immigrant populations. Because of language barriers, cultural differences, varying patterns of media consumption, and a host of other factors, broad-based media campaigns are unlikely to reach the people who most need the information.

One potentially effective approach is to use the principles of college access marketing, which involve identifying specific groups that are underserved by postsecondary education and developing marketing campaigns to get them to take actions (such as completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid) that are likely to increase their access to higher education. A key principle of college access marketing is to know your audience—find out what messages will appeal to them and

identify the media outlets most likely to reach them. Immigrant groups vary widely on a number of factors, so this sort of research-based and highly targeted outreach seems ideal for reaching them (Pathways to College Network 2006).

Another key principle of college access marketing is the use of direct outreach, especially peer outreach. The idea behind this approach is that people in a community know and understand the barriers to higher education that members of their community face and are best equipped to convey the message that a college education is attainable (Pathways to College Network 2006). In close-knit immigrant communities, word of mouth is often a crucial means by which people gain information. By recruiting community members who have attended college or who have children in college and providing them with the resources to reach out to others in the community, higher education officials and community groups can extend their reach and ensure that information reaches the people who need it most (Santiago 2006). This sort of personal outreach can reinforce media messages and encourage target audience members to actually take the actions suggested in media campaigns (Pathways to College Network 2006).

Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn from this report is that there is no one way to overcome the barriers immigrants face in gaining access to higher education in the United States. Like all low-income college students, many immigrants would benefit from an expansion of state and federal financial aid programs. Outreach programs aimed at increasing educational attainment for all Hispanic Americans are likely to benefit the growing Latino immigrant community as well. Added opportunities to learn English, whether in the K–12 system or as adults, would certainly be of widespread benefit for immigrants. For the most part, however, policies that address this challenging issue will have to be localized, narrow in focus, and targeted toward specific immigrant groups to ensure that these efforts reach those who most need assistance.

For some immigrants, gaining access to college in America is not much of a problem; for others, the barriers may seem insurmountable. One thing is certain—if immigration to the United States continues at its present pace, access to higher education for these new residents is going to become an issue in more states and for more people than ever before. The policy and program ideas suggested in this report are only a small step in what is likely to be a long and complicated process, but it is a process that must be started. We have succeeded, with past waves of immigrants, in providing the chance for social and economic advancement. As we move into the 21st century, it is increasingly obvious that social mobility requires access to postsecondary education. Increasing access to higher education for immigrants, then, is a necessity if the United States is to remain a land of opportunity for those who come here in search of a better life. ❧

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# Appendix:

# Data Sources and Limitations

The majority of the data used in this report comes from three federal sources: the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Immigration Statistics; the U.S. Census Bureau; and the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics. As explained in the introduction, each of these agencies uses somewhat different categories to define immigrants. The Census Bureau does not even use the word “immigrant” in its publications. To produce this report, we had to make some choices about which groups we would include under the rubric of immigrant when using data from each agency. This appendix contains details about the specific definitions and variables used by each data source.

## **Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS)**

OIS uses a relatively straightforward definition of “immigrant.” While the federal Immigration and Nationality Act defines an immigrant as any alien who enters the United States, except one admitted temporarily for a specific reason (such as a tourist or a foreign student), OIS generally limits the term to aliens legally admitted as permanent residents who may or may not eventually become naturalized citizens. Non-immigrants are defined as aliens who are legally admitted to the United States on a temporary basis (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2006a). These terms exclude both undocumented residents and humanitarian migrants such as refugees, although members of both groups may become immigrants if they adjust their immigration status to that of legal permanent resident.

OIS collects and publishes annual data on new members of the following groups: naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, refugees and asylees, and non-immigrants. The data collected include country of birth and last residence, current U.S. place of residence, and visa category, as well as gender, age, marital status, and occupation. Data on educational attainment are not collected (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2006b). OIS data are very useful in ascertaining the basic characteristics of the various types of legal entrants into the United States but do not track these persons after entry unless there is a change in immigration status—for example, a legal permanent resident who becomes a naturalized citizen. OIS provides annual population estimates for the groups listed above as well as for undocumented residents.

## **U.S. Census Bureau**

The U.S. Census Bureau does not use the term “immigrant” in its published statistics. Instead, the resident population of the United States is divided into two categories: native and foreign-born. Anyone who was an American citizen from birth is considered a U.S. native, even if they were born abroad to American parents. The foreign-born population is made up of current residents who were not American citizens at birth. The Census Bureau further divides the foreign-born population into naturalized citizens and non-citizens. Non-citizens include legal permanent residents and undocumented residents as well as temporary and humanitarian migrants (U.S. Census Bureau 2006a).

In both the Decennial Census and the American Community Survey (which was designed to collect the same information found on the cen-

sus “long form” on an annual basis), three key questions relate to immigration. These surveys ask about citizenship, which allows researchers to distinguish among native-born citizens, naturalized citizens, and non-citizens. They also ask about place of birth and, for the foreign-born population, year of entry into the United States (Migration Policy Institute 2003). Place of birth can be used to define region of origin, the most common categories for which are Europe, Asia (including the Middle East), and Latin America (including the Caribbean). In addition, the Census Bureau uses the year of entry variable to calculate the number of years each immigrant has lived in the United States, which, together with the person’s current age, can be used to determine age at the time of immigration. In conjunction with the wide range of demographic data collected in these surveys (gender, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, educational attainment, ability to speak English, occupation, income, and poverty status), these variables make it possible to produce extensive demographic profiles of the foreign-born population and to subdivide this group by citizenship status, year of entry, region of origin, and age at the time of immigration.

However, data collected by the Census Bureau cannot be used to separate legal permanent residents from other categories of non-citizen. As a result, all analyses of census and American Community Survey data related to non-citizens include a substantial percentage of undocumented residents and a smaller percentage of temporary residents such as foreign students. The Census Bureau does attempt to exclude most short-term visitors to the United States by limiting the American Community Survey sample to persons who expect to reside at the sampled address

for at least two months. An additional limitation to using American Community Survey data is that the survey does not currently include people living in group quarters, including college and university dormitories (U.S. Census Bureau 2006b). This limitation means that the survey is likely to undercount college students, particularly those of traditional age who are most likely to live on campus.

### **National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)**

NCES, in its 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), combines a variety of data sources to create a specific variable for immigrant status. Students responding to this survey—which uses a nationally representative sample of undergraduate and graduate college students to gain a clearer understanding of how students and their families pay for postsecondary education—are asked if they were born in the United States, if one or both parents were born in the United States, and if they are a U.S. citizen, resident alien, or foreign student. From the responses to these questions, NCES calculates an immigrant status variable that includes the following categories: foreign students with visas, resident aliens or financial aid-eligible non-citizens, foreign-born citizens, U.S. citizens with foreign-born parents, and all other citizens. The term “financial aid-eligible non-citizens” applies to certain humanitarian migrants who are eligible for federal financial aid even though they are neither American citizens nor legal permanent residents (NCES 2004).

By filtering the category of foreign students with visas and combining resident aliens with foreign-born citizens and citizens with foreign-born parents with all other citizens, it is possible to distinguish between

immigrants and non-immigrants. The category of U.S. citizens with foreign-born parents also allows analysis of second-generation immigrants. However, the data may not include undocumented residents, and if they do, it is not possible to separate them from other foreign-born students. NPSAS data also do not distinguish between naturalized citizens and citizens born abroad to American parents. As a result, analyses of immigrant students will include a fairly substantial percentage of foreign-born students (about 17 percent of undergraduates, for example) who have at least one parent who was born in the United States and who may thus actually have been American citizens from birth (NCES 2004). Immigration law regarding the foreign-born children of American citizens is somewhat complex. In general, if both parents are citizens and at least one has lived in the United States at some point or if one parent is a citizen and has lived in the United States for a specified period of time (from one to five years, depending on the circumstances), then the child is also an American citizen (U.S. House of Representatives 2006).

An additional limitation to using NPSAS to study immigrant students is the fact that the survey questions do not include either year of immigration or place of birth. Without these questions, it is not possible to determine age at the time of immigration (and thus separate out students who immigrated as children). It is also not possible to accurately identify region of origin. In this report, we use race as a proxy for region of origin, but there are some limits to this choice. In particular, immigrant students who self-identify as Black may have come from either Africa or Latin America, while students who self-identify as White may be from Europe or from the Middle East, an area that the Census Bureau groups with Asia. Because of the extent to which region of origin and age at the time of immigration have a critical impact on educational attainment, these limitations reduce the value of the NPSAS data in understanding which immigrant groups are currently represented in the U.S. college student population.

The 2003–04 NPSAS oversampled a selection of states, thus providing the opportunity for researchers to examine a representative sample of students at the state level. The oversampling process included students at public two-year and at private nonprofit and public four-year institutions in 12 states. Data acquired through this process were used in our analyses of the immigrant student populations in Georgia, California, and New York. While the samples used for these state-level analyses are representative of the state populations, they are substantially smaller than the NPSAS sample as a whole, and analyses that divide these data into many categories can produce larger standard errors.

A second key data source from NCES is the 1996–2001 Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study (BPS). Participants in this study were chosen from the first-year undergraduates surveyed in the 1995–96 NPSAS and were resurveyed in 1998 and 2001 to look at issues such as persistence, transfer, stop-outs or drop-outs, and degree completions. Because the participants were drawn from the 1995–96 NPSAS, the variables used to determine immigrant status are somewhat different than those found in the 2003–04 NPSAS. The immigrant status variable (called “country of origin (birth)” in BPS) is derived from questions about citizenship and country of birth. The citizenship variable divides respondents into U.S. citizens, non-citizens (aid-eligible), and non-citizens (not aid-eligible). These categories, along with country of birth, are used to produce the following immigrant categories: non-resident alien, permanent resident, naturalized citizen, and U.S. native. Permanent residents and naturalized citizens were considered immigrants for the purposes of this report.

As in the 2003–04 NPSAS, the category of naturalized (or foreign-born) citizen conflates naturalized citizens with native citizens born abroad to U.S. citizen parents. Because BPS does not ask if students’ parents were born in the United States, it is not possible to determine the extent to which this is a problem. In addition, BPS, like NPSAS, may not include undocumented residents and does not provide the year of immigration. Another problem with the BPS data is that over 20 percent of respondents did not provide a country of birth. This omission means that the sample size is considerably reduced when looking at immigrants versus non-immigrants in BPS. Because of this problem and because the country of origin variable is limited to two dozen countries, we elected to use race as a proxy for region of origin as we did for the NPSAS data, although that choice implies dealing with the difficulties described above.

The limitations of all of these data sources mean that our analysis of immigrant access to and success in higher education is necessarily incomplete. At this time, however, the data we used are the best available from national sources. For future studies of legal immigrants, the New Immigrant Survey—a longitudinal study of new legal permanent residents begun in 2003–04 under the auspices of the Office of Population Research at Princeton University—has the potential to offer considerable insight about access to higher education for immigrants. This survey includes data that will permit researchers to analyze the legal immigrant population by region of origin, age at the time of immigration, educational attainment prior to immigration, and other key factors that can affect an immigrant’s need for and access to postsecondary education in the United States (Office of Population Research 2006). It will be some time, however, before this study has sufficient data to analyze educational attainment after arrival in the United States. In addition, it focuses exclusively on legal immigrants and therefore will not answer questions about higher education access for undocumented residents. ❧





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