

Higher Education and Children in Immigrant Families

Sandy Baum and Stella M. Flores

Summary

The increasing role that immigrants and their children, especially those from Latin America, are playing in American society, Sandy Baum and Stella Flores argue, makes it essential that as many young newcomers as possible enroll and succeed in postsecondary education.

Immigrant youths from some countries find the doors to the nation's colleges wide open. But other groups, such as those from Latin America, Laos, and Cambodia, often fail to get a postsecondary education. Immigration status itself is not a hindrance. The characteristics of the immigrants, such as their country of origin, race, and parental socioeconomic status, in addition to the communities, schools, and legal barriers that greet them in the United States, explain most of that variation.

Postsecondary attainment rates of young people who come from low-income households and, regardless of income or immigration status, whose parents have no college experience are low across the board. Exacerbating the financial constraints is the reality that low-income students and those whose parents have little education are frequently ill prepared academically to succeed in college.

The sharp rise in demand for skilled labor over the past few decades has made it more urgent than ever to provide access to postsecondary education for all. And policy solutions, say the authors, require researchers to better understand the differences among immigrant groups.

Removing barriers to education and to employment opportunities for undocumented students poses political, not conceptual, problems. Providing adequate funding for postsecondary education through low tuition and grant aid is also straightforward, if not easy to accomplish. Assuring that Mexican immigrants and others who grow up in low-income communities have the opportunity to prepare themselves academically for college is more challenging. Policies to improve the elementary and secondary school experiences of all children are key to improving the postsecondary success of all.

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Like native youths whose parents have no college experience and others from low-income backgrounds, many immigrants and their children face significant barriers to enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education. Their difficulties are frequently compounded by inadequate information about college opportunities and how to access them, cultural differences, citizenship issues, language barriers, and, too frequently, discrimination. By contrast, other immigrants find the doors to U.S. higher education wide open and surpass native white youth in enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education. Recent immigrant flows to the United States have, in essence, divided newcomers into two groups, each with highly distinctive characteristics. One is composed of highly skilled professionals primarily from Asia who fill high-demand positions in engineering, the medical professions, and other technical occupations. The other consists of unskilled labor and manual workers primarily from Latin America, the Caribbean, and some Southeast Asian countries.¹ The latter group of immigrants faces obstacles to getting a postsecondary education that are difficult to overcome, while the former does very well in U.S. higher education. Not surprisingly, the differences among immigrants are reflected in the experiences of succeeding generations.

Largely because of the variation in immigrant characteristics, the links between immigrant status and postsecondary educational outcomes in the United States are complex and highly dependent on country of origin. Immigrants' prior education when they enter the United States plays a large role in the subsequent educational attainment of their children. Immigration status itself is not a hindrance. The characteristics of immigrants

when they arrive and the subcultures in the United States into which they are absorbed—and in which they raise the second generation—explain most of the variation in overall postsecondary outcomes in the United States. Over generations, even the most traditionally disadvantaged immigrants, such as Mexicans, show some gains in educational attainment, although in terms more of high school completion than of postsecondary success.

For all immigrants and their descendants to succeed in postsecondary education would not only improve prospects for both economic and social mobility for individuals but also confer benefits on society as a whole. With the already sharp rise in demand for skills and education in the U.S. labor market likely to continue,² the cost to the nation of failing to minimize the barriers to postsecondary education for less-skilled immigrant groups is high. Especially in view of recent increases in the immigrant population share and the resulting shift in the ethnic and racial composition of the United States, policy makers and educators should focus on increasing immigrants' participation in postsecondary education to ensure the long-run strength of the U.S. economy.

We begin by comparing the educational attainment of different subgroups of immigrants and their children and by comparing their educational attainment with that of U.S. natives. We then examine several competing explanations for the differing educational outcomes of subgroups of immigrants. We distinguish between characteristics of immigrants themselves, such as country of origin, race, and education on the one hand, and structural factors, such as communities, the quality of schools, and legal barriers shaping their experiences on the other. We conclude by assessing the payoff to postsecondary

Table 1. Educational Attainment of Immigrants Aged Twenty-Five to Thirty-Four by Generation, 1999 and 2009, by Percent

Generation	1999				2009			
	Less than high school	High school	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher	Less than high school	High school	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher
First	30	24	19	27	29	25	17	29
Second	9	25	32	34	10	25	31	34
Third or higher	8	33	30	29	7	29	31	33

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March Supplement, 1989, 2009 (cps.ipum.org).

Notes: First generation refers to individuals born outside the United States; second generation refers to individuals born in the United States with at least one parent born outside the United States; third generation or higher refers to individuals who were born in the United States to parents born in the United States.

education in U.S. society and examining the implications for all individuals regardless of immigrant origin.

The Educational Attainment of Immigrants and Their Children

Although the educational attainment of immigrants and their children differs from that of nonimmigrants, or natives, in many ways, differences across subgroups of immigrants are frequently even greater than those between “average” immigrants and natives. For example, on average, in 2000, children of immigrants were nearly as likely as children in native families to have a father with a B.A. degree. The averages, however, obscure the reality that 50 to 80 percent of foreign-born fathers from Africa, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, Pakistan/Bangladesh, and Iran were college graduates, compared with only 4 to 10 percent of fathers from Mexico, the Caribbean, Laos, and Cambodia.³ These differences in parental education have a profound effect on the experiences of their children.

Approximately one in eight U.S. residents today is an immigrant, while nearly a quarter of all of the nation's children are the children of immigrants. These children make up

approximately 30 percent of all low-income U.S. children.⁴ The children of undocumented immigrants, 73 percent of whom are U.S. citizens, make up an estimated 7 percent of elementary and secondary school students in the United States.⁵

Tables 1–5, based on data from the U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS), show differences in educational attainment for different generations of immigrants. The tables rely on a widely used definition of generational status.⁶ First-generation immigrants are foreign-born; second-generation immigrants were born in the United States and have at least one foreign-born parent; natives—third generation or higher—include individuals who were born in the United States and both of whose parents were born in the United States. The CPS data offer the advantage of being able to capture the nativity, or country of origin, of both the respondents and their parents. As cross-sectional data, however, they do not allow the presentation of actual intergenerational mobility without the use of statistical techniques not employed here.⁷ Therefore, individuals of the second generation are not the direct descendants of the first generation captured in the same tables during the same time frame.

Table 2. Share of Immigrants Aged Twenty-Five to Thirty-Four with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher by Generation and by Race and Ethnicity, 2009, by Percent

Generation	Hispanic	Black	Asian	White
First	9	30	63	54
Second	19	42	57	48
Third or higher	16	18	33	37

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March Supplement, 2009 (cps.ipum.org).

Table 1 compares the educational attainment in 1999 and 2009 of first-generation immigrants aged twenty-five to thirty-four with that of their second-generation and third-generation-or-higher counterparts of the same age. In 1999, first-generation immigrants were less likely than subsequent generations to have completed high school, and that pattern had not changed measurably in 2009. Bachelor's degree attainment rates were much more similar across immigrant generations. In 2009, 29 percent of first-generation immigrants of this age group had completed a bachelor's degree, compared with 34 percent of the second generation and 33 percent of the third generation (again, U.S.-born to U.S.-born parents).

Some groups of immigrants come to the United States with high levels of education and fare well as they integrate into an unfamiliar society. As reported in table 2, about two-thirds of Asian and more than half of all white immigrants aged twenty-five to thirty-four have earned at least a bachelor's degree, compared with only 9 percent of Hispanic immigrants. Second-generation black and Hispanic individuals are much more likely than their first-generation counterparts to complete four-year college degrees, narrowing the racial and ethnic gaps among the

second generation to some extent. Among blacks in particular, but to a lesser extent for all racial and ethnic groups, the bachelor's degree attainment rate is lower for the third generation than for the second generation, who are the children of immigrants.

About half of all Hispanic immigrants aged twenty-five to thirty-four have no high school diploma, compared with 9 percent of black immigrants and 5 percent of Asian and white immigrants in this age range.⁸ The lack of a high school degree, insufficient English language proficiency, the social and cultural capital networks of the receiving U.S. communities in which immigrants locate, and differences in degrees of discrimination or social acceptance all affect the prospects for social mobility.⁹

Determinants of Higher Education Participation and Success

In this section we examine several characteristics that help to determine success in higher education, with an emphasis on those specific to immigrants and their children.

Parental Education

Research has shown that parental education is a strong predictor of children's educational attainment.¹⁰ Even when analysts control for income—that is, when they compare only youth with similar family income—they find that young people whose parents have no college experience are much less likely than others to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education. According to 2006 American Community Survey data, 26 percent of children of immigrants, compared with only 8 percent of those with native-born parents, lived in families where no parent had completed high school or the equivalent. Almost half of Mexican-origin youth have parents with no high school degree.¹¹

As the data in table 1 indicate, the gap between immigrants and the native-born is greater for high school than for college completion. Immigrants from the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia, other Pacific nations, and Europe are more likely than native-born individuals to be college graduates, whereas those from Mexico, Central America, the Spanish Caribbean, Laos, and Cambodia have much lower educational attainment. The differences are dramatic. More than two-thirds of immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia have at least a bachelor's degree, compared with only 7 percent of those from Mexico.¹² This bimodal distribution of educational attainment among immigrants translates into a built-in advantage for some and severe disadvantage for others—disadvantage that persists across generations.

Academic Preparation

While imperfect measures, high school grades and standardized test scores are the best available indicators of academic preparation. Both are highly correlated with socioeconomic status. SAT scores are not available by country of origin, but the gaps among ethnic groups are notable. In 2009 white high school seniors averaged 528 on the verbal and 536 on the math SAT. Asian students scored slightly lower than whites on the verbal and higher on the math. Black students had the lowest scores, averaging 429 verbal and 426 math, but Hispanics were not far ahead of blacks. Mexican, Puerto Rican, and other Hispanic students averaged between 452 and 455 on the verbal SAT and between 450 and 463 on the math.¹³

The fundamental issue of school quality is beyond the scope of this paper. The importance of academic preparation in determining postsecondary prospects, however, makes an understanding of the factors affecting the

quality of elementary and secondary schooling critical. U.S. schools vary dramatically in their financial resources, their facilities, the quality of their teachers, and the characteristics of their student bodies. Focusing on relationships between immigrant students and school personnel, Carola Suárez-Orozco, Allyson Pimentel, and Margary Marin found that school-based supportive relationships contributed to engagement with school and greater student effort, as well as academic performance as measured by grades. Other predictors of increased academic achievement for immigrant students are English language skill, being female, having two parents in the home, and having an employed father.¹⁴

Age at Immigration

Age at immigration also makes a predictable difference in educational attainment. Immigrants who enter the country before age thirteen generally do as well as their native-born peers.¹⁵ Individuals who come to the United States as young children are likely to have an easier time learning the language and internalizing the norms of American society. By contrast, those who immigrate between the ages of thirteen and nineteen have the lowest levels of educational attainment. In 2005 only 26 percent of immigrants aged eighteen to twenty-four who arrived in the United States between the ages of thirteen and nineteen had enrolled in college, compared with 42 percent of those who immigrated before age thirteen.

Table 3 shows patterns of educational attainment by age (younger than twelve, twelve to eighteen, and older than eighteen) at immigration for youth from Mexico and other Latin American countries. Because of sample size limitations in the data, it is not possible to isolate a narrow age range for these comparisons. Mexican immigrants are less

Table 3. Latin American Immigrants Aged Twenty-Five and Older without a High School Diploma and with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher, by Age at Immigration, 2009, by Percent

Region of origin	Age at immigration	Percentage with less than a high school diploma	Percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher
Mexico	<12	35	10
	12–18	60	3
	>18	64	6
Other Latin America	<12	13	30
	12–18	25	20
	>18	35	19

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March Supplement, 2009 (cps.ipum.org).

Note: Because of census data reporting, some immigrants arrived in the United States when they were slightly younger than the age categories listed here.

likely to have completed high school or college than those from other Latin American countries. Within both origin groups, immigrants who came to the United States before age twelve are much more likely to have completed high school and college than those who arrived later in their lives. Hispanic immigrants are more likely to enter the country as teenagers and young adults than are other groups.¹⁶ This differential pattern of age at entry compounds the gaps in the higher educational outcomes of Hispanics.

Interpreting differences in educational attainment by age at immigration is complicated by the reality that many immigrants in their late teens—particularly those from Mexico—immigrate to find work, never enrolling or intending to enroll in U.S. schools. R. S. Oropesa and Nancy Landale find that excluding these adolescents from the analysis substantially reduces gaps in school enrollment between Mexicans and whites and between native- and foreign-born Mexicans. Among sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds in 2000, 94 percent of U.S.-born Mexicans were in school, compared with only 71 percent of immigrants. However, 85 percent of the foreign-born who were

ever enrolled in a U.S. school remained enrolled.¹⁷ Low educational attainment among those who immigrate with no intention of enrolling in U.S. schools is not an indication of a lack of success in the U.S. educational system. U.S. schools must, however, address the barriers facing immigrants and the children of immigrants who enter the system but do not succeed.

Complexity of Applying for College

Lack of familiarity with the U.S. postsecondary education system is a challenge for immigrants—especially those who do not attend U.S. high schools and whose parents are not proficient in English.

Limited English proficiency is a particular problem for some groups of immigrants. In California in 2006, among Spanish-speaking immigrants (54 percent of all immigrants in the state), only 26 percent spoke English well, and 21 percent spoke no English at all. In contrast, about 65 percent of Filipino and Hindi-speaking immigrants spoke English very well; only 1 percent and 5 percent, respectively, spoke no English.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, greater English proficiency boosts educational attainment among immigrants.¹⁹

Applying for college and financial aid—a complex task even for students with English-speaking parents who are themselves college graduates²⁰—is far more difficult for the children of non-English-speaking immigrants, even those who are themselves fluent.

Educational Outcomes

Although many subgroups of immigrants do not fare well in the U.S. postsecondary education system, overall—because of the wide gaps in educational attainment by group—immigrants are actually more likely than their native counterparts to enroll in postsecondary education, and most children of immigrants attain higher levels of education than their parents. Among a few groups, however, most notably Mexicans, progress is more limited by most measures. Using various U.S. Census and Current Population Surveys over multiple decades to measure intergenerational mobility, James P. Smith finds that although schooling gaps for certain groups of immigrants, especially Mexicans, are large, they narrow by the second generation and appear to continue to narrow in the third generation.²¹ But despite evidence of progress across generations of Mexicans, the gap in educational attainment relative to other racial and ethnic groups, particularly whites and Asians, remains large.

The Immigrant Advantage

Researchers commonly find that immigrants, as well as their children, have higher levels of postsecondary educational attainment than do natives. Using data on the sophomore and senior high school classes of 1980, Georges Vernez, Allan Abrahamse, and Denise Quigley found that, controlling for other factors such as race and socioeconomic status, Hispanic and black immigrants were more likely to enroll in college than their native

counterparts, while immigrant status had no measurable effect among whites and Asians.²²

Allison Hagy and J. F. O. Staniec find similar results using more recent data. They examine postsecondary enrollment patterns within two years of graduation among 1992 high school graduates. Defining the first generation as the foreign-born children of immigrants and the second generation as U.S.-born children of immigrants, they observe that 75 percent of first-generation and 71 percent of second-generation high school graduates enrolled in postsecondary education, compared with only 65 percent of natives. Controlling for individual characteristics, Hagy and Staniec find that first-generation immigrant status is significant in increasing the probability of enrolling in college.²³

Hagy and Staniec find that Hispanics have the lowest four-year college participation rate within each generation. Second-generation Hispanics do have somewhat higher four-year enrollment than other Hispanics—31 percent compared with 28 percent of their native counterparts. Seventy percent of all second-generation Asian and Pacific Islanders enrolled in four-year institutions, compared with 46 percent of the native population and 55 percent of their first-generation counterparts. Although these averages conceal differences among Asian countries, the general pattern is that first- and second-generation immigrants have four-year college enrollment rates at least as high as, and generally higher than, native high school graduates of the same ethnicity.²⁴

Many researchers argue that the immigrant advantage is a result of “positive selection”—that immigrants from all countries tend to have higher levels of human capital and motivation than is typical in their

countries of origin.²⁵ The degree of positive selection is likely to be greater when the difficulty of immigrating is greater.²⁶ Another explanation for the immigrant advantage is “immigrant optimism.” If immigrants come to the United States with high expectations, they may have psychological resources to overcome socioeconomic disadvantages.²⁷ In other words, although immigrants vary widely by country of origin, they tend to share characteristics that improve their chances for success, and immigrant status per se does not appear to prevent people from accessing higher education.

College Success

For a variety of reasons, whether they are immigrants or natives, low-income students and youth whose parents have no college experience are more successful getting into college than they are in completing a degree.²⁸ Financial barriers certainly play a role here, and students with family obligations are most likely to find it difficult to piece together adequate funds without working excessive hours that interfere with their studies. But inadequate academic preparation, unrealistic expectations, and insufficient information to make sound choices about which institution is most suitable all contribute to the low completion rates of disadvantaged students.

A growing body of evidence on college-going youth generally suggests that those who attend the most selective institutions for which they are eligible are significantly more likely to complete degree requirements than similar students who enroll in less challenging institutions.²⁹ Because immigrant students tend to be unfamiliar with the U.S. higher education system, they are less likely to make optimal choices. Anna Zajacova, Scott Lynch, and Thomas Espenshade found

that immigrant students overlooked significant differences among institutions and based their choices on cost and location, not on quality measures.³⁰

Using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Wendy Erisman and Shannon Looney found that approximately half of students who entered four-year and two-year colleges in 1995 had earned a credential six years later. The figure was similar for immigrants and for the native-born (including the children of immigrants). But although 30 percent overall had earned a bachelor’s degree, only 23 percent of immigrant students (and 19 percent of noncitizens) had done so. Immigrants, instead, were more likely to have earned an associate’s degree. In other words, on average immigrants were as likely as others to complete their course of study, but the course of study they undertook was less ambitious. Black immigrants in particular had a high completion rate because the credential they pursued was a certificate. Among Hispanic immigrants, only 43 percent had earned any credential. Few black or Hispanic immigrants had earned a bachelor’s degree—10 percent of blacks and 14 percent of Hispanics, compared with 31 percent for white and Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants.³¹ Hispanic immigrants alone have disproportionately low completion rates.

Risk factors associated with low persistence and attainment in postsecondary education are more prevalent among immigrant undergraduates than among undergraduates in general. In 2003–04, 62 percent of immigrant students for whom data on parental income were available were in the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution. Students in this category are more likely than average to attend part time, be older, and support

Table 4. Bachelor's Degree Attainment of First- and Second-Generation Immigrants Aged Twenty-Five to Thirty-Four by Region of Origin, 2009, by Percent

Region of origin	First generation	Second generation
Mexico	6	15
Other Latin America	17	31
Africa and Caribbean*	32	45
Southeast Asia (excluding India, Pakistan)**	43	45
Southeast Asia (including India, Pakistan)	64	51
East Asia***	66	72
Europe	59	49

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March Supplement, 2009 (cps.ipum.org).

*Caribbean nations included with Africa: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

**Southeast Asia includes Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka.

***East Asia includes China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

dependents. They also have higher unmet financial need. These circumstances make it particularly impressive that immigrant students have rates of completion largely comparable to those of nonimmigrants.

Variation by Country of Origin

Generalizations about the educational attainment of the immigrant population may be misleading because outcomes among immigrant groups themselves are so diverse. In a study of educational attainment of immigrants arriving in the United States before age eighteen, Rubén Rumbaut found Chinese, Indians, and Koreans to be the most educated groups. Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Laotians, and Cambodians had very high school dropout rates. The least educated were the Mexican, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan foreign-born. For every Asian and Latin American ethnicity, the share of college graduates rose for the second generation while the share of high school dropouts fell. The differences across groups by country of origin also diminished among the second generation.³²

First- and second-generation Asians are much more likely to enroll in a four-year postsecondary school and much less likely than other immigrant groups or than high school graduates in the native population not to enroll in college at all. In contrast, first- and second-generation Hispanic immigrants are most likely not to enroll in postsecondary education. Their low enrollment rates are consistent with the patterns observed among Hispanics in the third generation or higher.³³

The variation in educational attainment among immigrants has grown as the Hispanic share of the immigrant population has increased. The overall educational attainment of immigrants rose from 1970 to 1990, though it rose less than that of the native population. The decline in the educational attainment of immigrants relative to natives is entirely attributable to declines in attainment at the bottom of the income distribution. At the 25th percentile the gap in the education of immigrants and natives grew; at the 50th percentile educational attainment rose for immigrants but not for natives; at the 75th percentile increases in attainment were

similar for the two groups. At the upper end of the distribution the immigrant population is and was at least as educated as the native population, but the educational attainment of immigrants at the lower end of the distribution has declined relative to natives, and the education level of Hispanic immigrants in particular has not increased.³⁴

Census data for 2009 reveal dramatic differences in the bachelor's degree attainment rates of immigrants from different countries (see table 4). About two-thirds of twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-old immigrants from East Asia and Southeast Asia have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 6 percent of Mexican immigrants and 17 percent of those from other Latin American countries. The children of Latin American immigrants, however, are much more likely than the first generation to have a four-year college degree, while for Southeast Asian and European immigrants the second generation is less likely than the first generation to have a degree. As a result, the gaps across countries of origin are smaller for the second generation.

Further information on differences by country of origin comes from Rubén Rumbaut, who studied a sample of immigrants in their mid-twenties. Of the sample as a whole, 20 percent had completed a bachelor's degree. Graduation rates ranged from 8 percent for Mexicans and 14 percent for Cambodians and Laotians to 47 percent for those from China, Taiwan, and other Asian countries.³⁵ Examining the determinants of educational attainment in this sample, Rumbaut found that having a U.S.-born parent was negatively associated with children's attainment—a finding consistent with evidence that assimilation into some ethnic cultures in the United States is associated with an eroding work ethic and deteriorating educational outcomes.

The strongest predictor of educational attainment was youths' expectations measured in junior high school and again in senior high school. Parental socioeconomic status was also a strong predictor. Being of Vietnamese origin had a positive link with educational attainment, while being of Cambodian origin had a negative link. Understanding why these two refugee groups differ so much would help clarify the divergent fates of immigrant groups in the United States. Despite the differences in overall college enrollment rates across immigrant groups, Hagy and Staniec conclude that if Asians and Hispanics had similar socioeconomic backgrounds, their postsecondary enrollment patterns would be indistinguishable from those of white immigrants.³⁶ As for high school graduates generally, family income, parents' education, and youths' educational achievement influence college enrollment. Being an immigrant—or belonging to a particular ethnic group—is not the primary determinant of postsecondary participation or of college enrollment.

Mexican Immigrants

As a group, Mexican immigrants are outliers in the stories of immigrant success in the U.S. postsecondary education system. They tend to enter the United States with little education, are less likely than other immigrant groups to enroll in college, and experience less continued improvement in education across generations than immigrants from other countries.

As reported in table 5, between 1999 and 2009, the share of Mexican immigrants aged twenty-five to thirty-four without a high school diploma fell from 60 percent to 55 percent. The contrasts between the first and the second generations are sharp, with only 19 percent of the U.S.-born children of immigrants in 2009 lacking a high school diploma.

Table 5. Educational Attainment of First- and Second-Generation Mexican Immigrants, 1999 and 2009, by Percent

Generation		No high school diploma	High school diploma	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher
First	1999	60	25	10	4
	2009	55	29	10	6
Second	1999	17	33	34	16
	2009	19	35	32	15

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March Supplement, 2009 (cps.ipum.org).

Fifteen percent of the second generation held at least a bachelor's degree, and another 32 percent had at least some college experience. In contrast, only 6 percent of the first generation held a bachelor's degree, and another 10 percent had completed some college.

Second-generation Mexican Americans, on average, advance well beyond the first generation. But they start far behind other groups, and, to complicate matters, 42 percent of second-generation Mexicans are teen parents and 11 percent are incarcerated. Mexicans, however, are not the only group with negative outcomes: immigrants from Haiti and from Laos and Cambodia follow similar patterns.³⁷

One factor that may diminish college enrollment rates for the children of Mexican immigrants is parental preference for children not to leave home for college. Ruth López Turley has found that immigrant parents, particularly those of Hispanic origin, feel this preference strongly, thus lowering the probability that their children will enroll in college.³⁸

As noted, there is considerable evidence that immigrants from all countries are positively selected from their national populations—that those who leave are better educated, more highly skilled, and more motivated than those who stay. Cynthia Feliciano, however,

finds that the difference is narrower in Mexico than in other countries. That is, Mexicans who immigrate tend to have higher average socioeconomic status than those who stay in Mexico, but the difference is smaller than in other countries. Most Mexican immigrants tend to start out on the bottom rungs of the ladder in the United States.³⁹ Low socioeconomic status surely explains some of the difficulties this group faces in accessing postsecondary opportunities, as does the fact that a disproportionate number of Mexican immigrants are undocumented.

As with educational attainment, the earnings trajectory across generations of Mexican immigrants suggests continuing problems. Examining the wage structure across generations of male Mexican immigrants based on 1979 and 1989 cross-sectional census data, Stephen Trejo finds considerable improvements between immigrants and their children. The second generation enjoys a sizable earnings advantage over first-generation Mexicans not only because of improved education and English proficiency, but also because of high returns to extra years of schooling. The pattern does not continue between the second and third generations. Educational attainment increases slightly, but this is not reflected in a measurable earnings increment.⁴⁰

In a study examining the intergenerational integration of the Mexican-origin population into American society in the latter half of the twentieth century, Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz find similar if not more discouraging results.⁴¹ Using a longitudinal, intergenerational design of five generations since immigration, the authors find a progressive decline in years of education for each subsequent generation since immigration, with the third and fourth generations exhibiting the lowest levels of schooling. Educational attainment explains a consistent lack of economic progress across generations for the Mexican-origin population.

The large and growing number of Mexican immigrants in the United States makes a specific focus on this group important. Research is vital because improving the prospects of immigrants from Mexico requires understanding how their circumstances differ from those of other immigrants.

Black Immigrants

Like many Hispanic immigrants, black immigrants to the United States enter a society in which members of their racial group have lower-than-average incomes and low rates of postsecondary participation and success. The patterns observed in Hispanic and black immigrant groups are quite different, however, largely because of the differences in their backgrounds when they enter the United States. Black immigrants are less likely than native-born blacks to have the characteristics that tend to reduce college enrollment rates. They more often come from two-parent families, attend private schools, and live outside rural areas than do native-born blacks. They are also less likely than native-born blacks to have low test scores. Black immigrant success, particularly evident in the frequency of enrollment in

selective colleges and universities is, however, limited to those from select countries.⁴² Other groups of black immigrants, including Haitians, face significant hardships.

What Accounts for the Differences?

A significant portion of the differences in educational outcomes across immigrant groups is attributable to their pre-immigration characteristics and experiences. Much of the difference in attainment can be explained by parent income and education. Researchers have produced some evidence, for example, that most Hispanics perform as well as native whites when comparisons are made between youth of similar socioeconomic background.⁴³

Background, however, does not tell the whole story. Parental income and education do not account well, for example, for all high Asian achievement. High performance of Southeast Asian children from refugee families is explained by peer and parent support, children tutoring each other, and a feeling of obligation to their immigrant parents, including a strong sense of responsibility about education, which families value highly.⁴⁴ Alejandro Portes, Patricia Fernández-Kelly, and William Haller find that a strong parental figure and attachment to cultural identity and traditions increase the probability of success for young people from groups with otherwise low success rates.⁴⁵

Hispanic immigrants are said by some to have lower expectations than other groups do for the educational attainment of their children.⁴⁶ A 2008 Public Agenda survey, however, explored the attitudes of Hispanic parents and contradicted this conventional wisdom, finding that these parents place even higher value on going to college than other parents do. Hispanic young adults are, however, less

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confident than other groups that funding is available to help pay for college, and many who are enrolled in postsecondary schools say they would have gone to a different college had money not been an issue. Fewer than half of the Hispanic respondents believe that qualified students can find a way to pay for college. Inadequate information and low expectations about the opportunities available to them appear to impede the academic achievement of Hispanic youth.⁴⁷

Governmental and Institutional Structures

The demographic characteristics of immigrant populations and their experiences before they enter the United States decisively shape their—and their descendants’—participation in the nation’s postsecondary education system. And so do the social, economic, and legal structures that immigrants encounter once they enter the United States. Some immigrants who arrive with high expectations and aspirations, particularly those with postsecondary educational experience in a home country, are able to navigate their new

educational environment more successfully than many native Americans are. Others, however, settle in communities beset with social and economic problems and with limited opportunities to become proficient in English. The guidance and experience necessary to take full advantage of the postsecondary education system in the United States are rarely available in these environments. Particularly in the case of undocumented immigrants, legal barriers also prevent many young people from enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education.

Legal Barriers

A growing number of children of immigrants under the age of eighteen are undocumented, and an even greater number—who are U.S. citizens themselves—are born to undocumented parents.⁴⁸ According to Jeffrey Passel and D’Vera Cohn, 53 percent of undocumented immigrants between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-four have graduated from high school, compared with 78 percent of legal immigrants. Almost half of the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old undocumented immigrants who have high school degrees are in college or have attended college. Among those who arrived before the age of fourteen, 61 percent have attended college.⁴⁹

Such a high postsecondary participation rate reflects unusual success at overcoming not only the barriers confronting all immigrants and particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds, but also formidable legal and financial barriers. Ineligible for federal and most state financial aid, undocumented students frequently confront out-of-state tuition rates. A few states, such as South Carolina and Georgia, bar their admission to many colleges and universities, but paying for college is generally the highest hurdle.

Many undocumented college students arrived in the United States at a young age and are less likely to suffer from the language barriers faced by those arriving later in life. Tuition and financial aid are critical to their college access.

Most of the recent progress in lowering the hurdles faced by undocumented students has been made by state legislatures.⁵⁰ Over the past decade, a number of states have implemented policies that offer in-state college tuition to out-of-state students who meet certain requirements, including graduating from an in-state high school.⁵¹ These laws, however, do not resolve issues of legal status, legal employment, or citizenship, nor do they make students eligible for the federal student aid they need.

Evidence about the effect these laws are having in increasing college enrollment among undocumented students is mixed. Both Neeraj Kaushal and Stella M. Flores find that students likely to be undocumented are more likely to attend college in states that offer them in-state tuition.⁵² And Flores and Catherine Horn find that in-state tuition beneficiaries at a selective public institution in Texas who are likely to be undocumented are as likely to persist and graduate as U.S.-born Latino students, the group most likely to share similar demographic characteristics.⁵³ In contrast, Aimee Chin and Chinhui Juhn find a small increase in college enrollment among Mexican men aged twenty-two to twenty-four who are likely to be undocumented, but no measurable change among women or other age groups. They hypothesize that in the absence of financial aid and solid employment prospects, lower tuition alone cannot increase these students' participation and success in higher education.⁵⁴

The primary effort at the national level to mitigate the problems facing undocumented students who aspire to, and are prepared to, attend college is the proposed Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. The legislation, which would open the door to legal status and citizenship for undocumented youth who succeed in postsecondary education, failed once again in 2010 to pass Congress, and, in the current political environment, appears unlikely to pass. College access for undocumented students is likely to remain, at least for now, the domain of state legislatures.

The Payoff to Higher Education

Enrollment in postsecondary education is increasingly closely tied to labor market success in the United States. Although having any postsecondary education pays off, completing a degree or certificate brings the most significant rewards. Four-year degrees have the highest economic value, but the average payoff to any postsecondary credential compared with a high school diploma is significant.⁵⁵ Adults with bachelor's degrees typically earn more than 50 percent more a year than their counterparts with only a high school education. For those with associate's degrees, the differential is about 30 percent, and even those with some college but no degree earn about 16 percent more than typical high school graduates.⁵⁶ The benefits of higher education are not all monetary; college graduates have broader career choices, prepare their children better for educational opportunities, and tend to have lifestyles that prolong their lives.⁵⁷

It is clear that limiting postsecondary opportunities is inequitable. It is, in addition, inefficient, because the benefits do not all accrue to the individuals who participate, but extend to society as a whole. People

who attend college pay higher taxes and are less likely to depend on public support than those who do not. Their increased productivity in the workplace is reflected in more rapid economic growth and higher earnings for their less educated co-workers. College graduates are also active citizens who, for example, vote and volunteer more regularly than others.⁵⁸

Today postsecondary education is widely recognized as being essential to economic security. The sharp rise in demand for skilled labor has increased the urgency of providing access to education for all.⁵⁹ Although earlier generations of immigrants may have been able to start at the bottom of the occupational ladder and see their children gradually climb up, the middle of that ladder is largely missing now. To move out of the low-paid, secondary labor market, most people need to build human capital through postsecondary education. Recent immigrants enter a very different economy than did those arriving a century ago.⁶⁰

Immigrants earn less, on average, than native-born Americans, but the relevant question here is how much their earnings increase with rising postsecondary educational attainment. Julian Betts and Magnus Lofstrom find that lower levels of immigrant schooling, as opposed to country of origin, race, and other characteristics, explain more than half of the approximately 18 percent wage gap between immigrants and natives. Researchers should learn more about why immigrants earn less than natives with similar years of education.

Available evidence indicates that for both Mexicans and whites, returns to postsecondary education are higher for natives than for immigrants.⁶¹ In other words, the differences

are related to having been born outside the country. Returns are essentially the same for the second generation of all immigrants as for third-generation whites. An encouraging finding is that for Mexicans, the returns increase for each year of U.S. work experience, and for the third and higher generations, returns look similar for Mexicans and whites.⁶²

Stephen Trejo finds that among U.S.-born workers, no matter what generation, returns to work experience are similar for all ethnicity and generation groups. He suggests that for workers with the same number of years of total work experience, more years of U.S. work increases immigrant earnings.⁶³

Attending postsecondary institutions in the United States also boosts earnings. When Zhen Zeng and Yu Xie compared the earnings of foreign-educated and U.S.-educated Asian immigrants they found that earnings differences between Asian immigrants and native-born whites with similar postsecondary education disappeared when foreign education was taken into consideration. Although U.S.-born whites, U.S.-born Asian Americans, and U.S.-educated Asian immigrants all had comparable earnings, foreign-educated Asian immigrants earned about 16 percent less than the other three groups.⁶⁴ In this case, it appears, then, to be the characteristics—or the perceived characteristics—of the educational credentials, not race or nativity per se, that create earnings differentials. Other researchers have found that U.S.-born Asian Americans earn at least as much as whites of equivalent educational attainment and that only foreign-born Asian men are disadvantaged relative to white men. Opinions differ about whether nativity per se or the associated language and cultural issues explain earnings differentials.⁶⁵

Zeng and Xie also find differential impacts of foreign postsecondary education within subgroups of Asian immigrants. Earnings differences among subgroups are small for those educated in the United States but quite large for those educated abroad. For example, immigrants educated in Japan earn about 40 percent more than native-born whites, while Filipino foreign-educated immigrants earn about 23 percent less. The authors conclude that differences in human capital between foreign- and U.S.-educated individuals generate the earnings gaps.⁶⁶ It is of course possible that this difference results from a lack of information about foreign credentials or discrimination against these credentials rather than from differences in productivity. The idea that immigrants' human capital attained abroad may not be fully valued in the labor market is not new.⁶⁷

In sum, the smaller earnings benefit of additional years of education for immigrants appears to be related to attending postsecondary institutions and gaining work experience in other countries.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries and their descendants constitute a rapidly growing portion of the population of the United States. Like others in the United States who grow up in households with low educational attainment and low earnings, these Latin American immigrants have, on average, relatively low rates of participation and success in postsecondary education. Language barriers and lack of familiarity with U.S. social institutions create difficulties, but it is not immigrant status per se that explains the unsatisfactory outcomes for these immigrant populations. Overall, immigrants and their children are actually more likely than natives to earn

Overall, immigrants and their children are actually more likely than natives to earn college degrees. But the gaps among groups from different countries of origin are large.

college degrees. But the gaps among groups from different countries of origin are large. Those from China, Japan, and many African countries have high success rates. Those from Mexico, Guatemala, Haiti, Laos, and Cambodia fare less well. The children of immigrants who benefited from postsecondary education in their countries of origin are likely to succeed in the United States. The children of parents who are not in a position to help them prepare for and navigate the postsecondary system are likely to struggle.

Solutions can emerge only from improved understanding of the differences among these groups, both in terms of their own characteristics and the human capital they bring to their new country, and in terms of the social and structural environments into which they are received.

Postsecondary attainment rates of young people who come from low-income households and, regardless of income, whose parents have no college experience, are low across the board. Because there will always be children growing up in such households—and because immigrants from certain countries are disproportionately represented among these children—designing policies that can help them is imperative. Doing so is

not only a matter of equity and of living up to the “American dream.” It is also a matter of the well-being of the nation’s economy and its society.

The similarity of the barriers to postsecondary education facing immigrants from Mexico and a number of other countries and those facing low-income American students—including large portions of the black and Hispanic populations—should make addressing the problems easier from a political perspective. Because immigration has become such a divisive political issue in the United States, focusing on the benefits to society of opening doors to higher education for all is the most promising strategy.

For young people from low-quality schools and from families and communities with little or no postsecondary experience, paying for college can be an enormous burden. Only those with legal permanent resident status and U.S. citizens are eligible for federal student aid, and much of that aid comes in the form of loans. Although there is considerable discussion about Hispanic students being particularly reluctant to incur debt, the evidence is weak, and it is likely that having better information and counseling about student financial aid could go a long way toward changing attitudes and making Hispanic students more likely to take out loans.⁶⁸

Making funds available is important, but it is only one part of the process. The students most in need of support generally lack the information they need to access these funds. Considerable evidence suggests that the effectiveness of financial aid programs now available to low-income students is diminished by their complexity and unpredictability.⁶⁹ An experiment that gave low-income students help in filling out the federal

financial aid form significantly increased their college enrollment, even without providing any additional funding.⁷⁰ Sometimes, changes in motivation and behavior resulting from financial incentives, rather than the extra funds themselves, can be central to improved postsecondary success. Judith Scott-Clayton, for example, found that West Virginia’s state grant program increases college completion rates by establishing clear academic goals and providing incentives to meet them.⁷¹

Exacerbating the financial constraints is the reality that low-income students and those whose parents have little education are frequently ill prepared academically to succeed in college. Many also lack support networks that would bolster aspirations and expectations about postsecondary education.

Improving the postsecondary success rates of the most vulnerable populations requires not only understanding the problems, but also gathering solid evidence about the effectiveness of potential policy solutions. Undocumented immigrants face legal barriers to education and to the employment opportunities for which they may be prepared. Removing these barriers for undocumented students poses political, not conceptual, problems. Similarly, providing adequate funding through some combination of low tuition and grant aid is straightforward, if not easy to accomplish. Ensuring that Mexican immigrants and others who grow up in low-income communities have the opportunity to prepare themselves academically to succeed in college is much more challenging. Policies to improve the elementary and secondary school experiences of all children are likely the most important components of a strategy to improve the postsecondary success of immigrant children.

Given the increasing role that immigrants and their children, especially those from Latin America, will play in American society in the coming years, it is essential to give as many young people as possible the opportunity to enroll and succeed in post-secondary education. Policies for removing

financial barriers and improving elementary and secondary school outcomes are vital for all segments of American society. That the most vulnerable group of immigrants is likely to continue to be the fastest growing only increases the urgency of finding the most effective policies.

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