



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

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

A POLICY REPORT BY
Institute for Higher Education Policy

SUPPORTED BY
Lumina Foundation for Education

Opening the Door to the American Dream: Increasing Higher Education Access and Success for Immigrants, a groundbreaking study by the **Institute for Higher Education Policy**, examines the systemic barriers that can prevent immigrants from enrolling in college and/or completing bachelor's degrees. If these barriers are not overcome, the study argues, the nation may find itself with a workforce that does not have sufficient education to enable the United States to remain competitive in a global economy.

Immigrants and Higher Education

Legal immigrants face a number of barriers that can prevent them from gaining access to the benefits of higher education.

- These barriers include limited finances, work and family responsibilities, varied academic backgrounds, limited English proficiency, and a lack of knowledge about the American system of higher education.

As a result of these barriers, immigrants enroll in college and complete bachelor's degrees at rates lower than their native-born peers.

- Among young adult immigrants age 18–24, especially those who are legal permanent residents, both high school graduation and college enrollment rates are lower than for native-born citizens.
- Immigrants made up 12 percent of undergraduate students as of 2003–04—a percentage that makes this group of minority students comparable in numbers to students with disabilities (11 percent), Hispanic students (13 percent), and Black students (14 percent)—but have received little attention in discussions of higher education policy.
- Only 23 percent of immigrant undergraduates who started college in 1995 completed a bachelor's degree after five years, a percentage significantly below the U.S. average.

Legal immigrant undergraduates are more likely than the general undergraduate population to experience risk factors associated with dropping out of college.

- Immigrant students are 17 percent more likely than undergraduate students in general to attend school on a part-time basis, which accelerates drop-out rates.

- Immigrant students are more likely to be 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.
- More than half of all immigrant undergraduates and two-thirds of legal permanent resident undergraduates indicated that their primary language was not English.

Some immigrant groups experience particular difficulties in gaining access to and completing higher education.

- Immigrant students' needs and risk factors vary based on country of origin, age at the time of immigration, and educational attainment prior to immigration.
- Latino immigrants and those who immigrate to the U.S. as teenagers are the immigrant groups least likely to enroll in college.

Benefits of Investing in Higher Education for Immigrants

Higher education is a critical, proven factor in creating a strong social fabric.

- Persons with bachelor's degrees are more likely to earn high wages and are less likely to be unemployed, incarcerated, or in need of public assistance.
- A population with higher levels of educational attainment is more competitive in a global economy.

Immigrants have been, and will continue to be, a vital part of the American economy as both workers and entrepreneurs.

- In 2005, around 15 percent of the civilian labor force age was foreign-born, while the unemployment rate for immigrants was virtually identical to that of native-born citizens.

Recommendations

Participation by federal, state and local policymakers, and higher education institutions can increase immigrant access to and success in higher education.

Recommendation 1

Increase support for programs that address the barriers experienced by immigrants seeking a college education.

- Ensure that legal permanent residents are eligible for all forms of state and federal financial aid, including the Academic Competitiveness Grants and the National Science and Math Access to Retain Talent (SMART) Grants, which are currently limited to U.S. citizens.
- Recognize immigrant students as a target population for federal TRIO programs, including offering training in immigrant issues to TRIO staff.
- Increase the availability of English as a Second Language classes for both teenage and adult immigrants, as language can be a fundamental barrier to college access and success.
- Develop programs and policies targeted to assist Latino immigrants

Recommendation 2

Create more transparent financial aid and college application processes, including widespread dissemination of information, resources, and contacts.

- Immigrants are less likely to know that financial aid resources are available and how to apply. They are also less likely to have the language and financial literacy skills to navigate the complex financial aid application process.
- Colleges and universities can help degree-seeking immigrant students by ensuring that admissions and financial aid counselors are familiar with regulations on immigration status and financial aid and the process of transcript review for students with foreign high school diplomas or college transcripts.

Recommendation 3

Create state, local, and institutional policies that target the differing needs of various immigrant populations.

- Because a lack of understanding of the American higher education system is a fundamental barrier that can prevent immigrants from gaining access to college, outreach to immigrant communities is an essential strategy for states, cities, and postsecondary institutions.
- Immigrant groups' needs vary so each locality must identify its specific immigrant populations and their related barriers to higher education and tailor policy decisions based on those findings.

THE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY (IHEP) IS AN INDEPENDENT, NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION THAT IS DEDICATED TO ACCESS AND SUCCESS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AROUND THE WORLD. ESTABLISHED IN 1993, THE WASHINGTON, D.C.-BASED ORGANIZATION USES UNIQUE RESEARCH AND INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS TO INFORM KEY DECISION MAKERS WHO SHAPE PUBLIC POLICY AND SUPPORT ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT. IHEP'S WEB SITE, WWW.IHEP.ORG, FEATURES AN EXPANSIVE COLLECTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INFORMATION AVAILABLE FREE OF CHARGE AND PROVIDES ACCESS TO SOME OF THE MOST RESPECTED PROFESSIONALS IN THE FIELDS OF PUBLIC POLICY AND RESEARCH.



INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY
1320 19th Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

202 861 8223 TELEPHONE
202 861 9307 FACSIMILE
www.ihep.org WEB