

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

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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.

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. Nationally, 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.

Immigrants and Higher Education in 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.

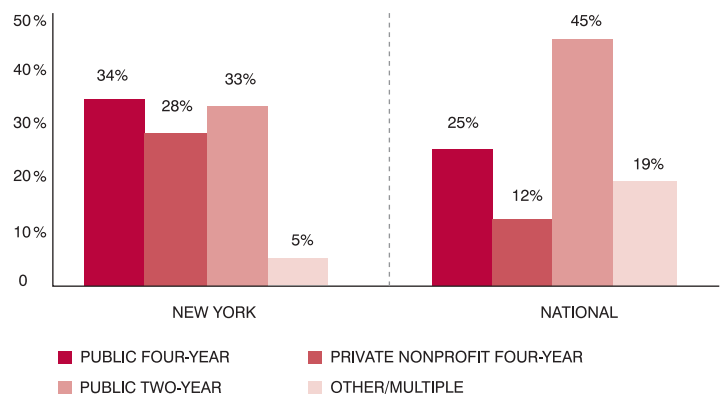
- The state ranks third in the nation in foreign-born, limited English proficient residents.
- New York's immigrant population includes a wide range of national origins, with the largest percentage of foreign-born residents hailing from Latin America (about 50 percent).
- Almost three-quarters of the state's immigrants live in New York City, comprising 37 percent of the city's population.
- About 57 percent of undergraduate college students in New York are foreign-born.

Immigrant college students in New York face challenges similar to those faced by immigrant students nationally but are better served by the local higher education system.

- Almost half of New York immigrant undergraduate students had parents with no more than a high school education, and 76 percent of dependent immigrant undergraduates came from families with incomes in the two lowest income quintiles.
- As of 2003–04, over two-thirds of the state's immigrant undergraduate students were enrolled in a four-year college or university (compared to 36 percent nationally).
- Additionally, 55 percent of immigrant undergraduates in New York were enrolled in school full-time (compared to 43 percent nationally).
- Almost half (49 percent) of New York immigrant undergraduates received state grant aid (compared to 17 percent nationally).

Distribution of Immigrant Undergraduates by Institutional Type for New York State and the United States, 2003–04

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



New York state policymakers and advocacy groups recognize the needs of immigrant students.

- In 2002, New York passed legislation revising tuition guidelines to allow undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition if they graduated from a New York high school or earned a GED in the state, applied to a state college or university within five years of completing the secondary credential, and agreed to apply for legal immigration status.
- Advocacy organizations like the New York Immigration Coalition assess state and local policies on English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction at the K–12 level; monitor state and city legislation concerning immigrant rights, including higher education access; and advocate for immigrant students and parents.

The City University of New York (CUNY) plays an important role in access to higher education for immigrants.

- In 2000, a significant portion of CUNY’s first-time freshmen were foreign-born; additionally, 55 percent of freshman at CUNY community colleges were foreign-born.
- At LaGuardia Community College in Queens as of 2006, immigrant students made up about 60 percent of the student population, representing 150 countries and speaking about 110 different languages.
- Key programs for immigrant students include the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP), which uses sustained content-based teaching to develop English language skills as they relate to basic non-credit courses in arts and humanities, technology, and science.
 - CLIP is open to students at all postsecondary levels, and students must take CUNY’s entry exam in order to qualify for the program.
 - Students must pay a fee to enroll in CLIP classes, but CUNY subsidizes the program to keep the fee as low as possible.

Recommendation 1

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

- Ensure that immigrant students are eligible for all forms of state financial aid.
- Increase the availability of ESL 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 and those who immigrate as teenagers—the immigrant groups least likely to enroll in college.

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 through 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.

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