

Immigrants in Community Colleges

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Summary

Immigrant youth and children of immigrants make up a large and increasing share of the nation's population, and over the next few decades they will constitute a significant portion of the U.S. workforce. Robert Teranishi, Carola Suárez-Orozco, and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco argue that increasing their educational attainment, economic productivity, and civic engagement should thus be a national priority.

Community colleges offer one particularly important venue for achieving this objective. Because they are conveniently located, cost much less than four-year colleges, feature open admissions, and accommodate students who work or have family responsibilities, community colleges are well suited to meet the educational needs of immigrants who want to obtain an affordable postsecondary education, learn English-language skills, and prepare for the labor market. The authors explore how community colleges can serve immigrant students more effectively.

Already, more immigrant students attend community colleges than any other type of postsecondary institution. But community colleges could attract even more immigrant students through outreach programs that help them to apply and to navigate the financial aid system. Federal reforms should also allow financial aid to cover tuition for English as a Second Language courses. Community colleges themselves could raise funds to provide scholarships for immigrants and undocumented students.

Although there are many good ideas for interventions that can boost enrollment and improve the performance of immigrant students in community colleges, rigorous research on effective programs is scant. The research community and community colleges need to work together closely to evaluate these programs with a view toward what works and why. Without such research, policy makers will find it difficult to improve the role of community colleges in increasing the educational achievement of immigrant students.

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In the context of America's vast system of postsecondary education, community colleges are of particular importance for immigrant students. Today more than 1,200 community colleges offer an accessible and affordable postsecondary education that accommodates many of the needs of immigrant students. Community colleges—offering certificates, associate's degrees, and a range of courses on topics ranging from the philosophical to the practical—give immigrants access to affordable and accessible postsecondary education, opportunities to learn English, and training for the labor force. These institutions are also a source for civil and cultural engagement in the local community, catering to working adults with evening courses and offering postsecondary education in proximity to homes and jobs.

Obtaining a certificate or associate's degree from a community college is also a significant factor in the economic mobility of immigrants. In 2008, for example, adults with at least some college or an associate's degree experienced unemployment rates that were about half those of adults who had not completed high school.¹ In 2009, the median income within all racial groups for adults with an associate's degree was nearly twice that of persons who did not complete high school and nearly 40 percent greater than that of persons whose highest level of educational attainment was high school completion.² These data underscore the importance of community colleges for access to good jobs in an economy that has an ever-increasing number of jobs that require at least some postsecondary education or training.³

More immigrant students attend community colleges than any other postsecondary institution. In this article, we consider the

opportunities and challenges that immigrant students present to community colleges and suggest strategies that community colleges can use to serve this rapidly growing student population more effectively.

As Jeffrey Passel demonstrates in his article in this volume, immigrants to the United States, particularly immigrant youth and the children of immigrants, make up a large and increasing share of the nation's population. Between 2005 and 2050, the U.S. population is projected to expand by 48 percent, with immigrants expected to make up 82 percent of that growth. By 2050, nearly one in five U.S. residents will be foreign-born and about one in three will be foreign-born or the children of immigrant parents. A large share of both groups will be young. Youth aged seventeen to twenty-four, for example, made up nearly 25 percent of total immigrants in the 2000 census, up from 13 percent in 1990, and this percentage is expected to keep rising.⁴

As immigrants' numbers and population share have grown, their composition has become more diverse. Before passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the vast majority of immigrants arrived from Europe. Today immigrants come from all corners of the world, with more than three-quarters arriving from Latin America and Asia. They leave their countries of origin under widely different circumstances, arrive under a variety of conditions with differing assets and challenges, and bring with them a wide range of educational backgrounds and goals.

While many Asian immigrants come from educated and elite families, a large sector of the Asian-immigrant population arrives from impoverished rural areas, having grown up in families with little or no formal education.⁵

The nation's largest immigrant population, that from Mexico and other Latin American countries, has a high concentration of adults with limited formal education. In 2008, approximately 7.5 million foreign-born Latinos over age twenty-five in the United States had no high school degree.⁶ Between 2010 and 2025, as the predominantly white baby boomer population exits the U.S. workforce, the population of working-age Latinos is projected to increase by 13.5 million.⁷ Because of the weak condition of the nation's economy and projected shortfalls in funding for public retirement programs, increasing the educational attainment, economic productivity, and civic engagement of immigrants and their children should be a national priority.⁸

Community Colleges and Immigrant Students

Lacking a reliable national data source on immigrant students who attend community colleges, researchers have only limited knowledge about foreign-born students' immigration status and country of origin.⁹ What data there are on these students often confound "international students" (foreign-born, attending college with a student visa, and intending to return to their country of origin) and "immigrant students" (foreign-born, attending college as an immigrant, and intending to remain in the United States). Our concern in this chapter is primarily with the latter.

Student Characteristics and Needs

International college students typically earn their high school credentials in their country of origin. Many, though not all, are well prepared academically; their major challenges are typically to improve their English language skills and to become familiar with U.S. educational norms. By contrast, immigrant college students experience varying degrees of academic preparation and academic challenges.

Although immigrant students have varying skills in academic English, depending in part on the quality of the schools they attended, those who entered the U.S. educational system at an early age are typically well acculturated and speak English fluently by the time they graduate from high school. Many are the first in their families to attend college. Some are undocumented. By contrast, students who entered the U.S. educational system after age thirteen often attend schools that "overlook and underserve" them¹⁰ and, depending on their previous educational experiences both in their country of origin and in U.S. schools, may face more serious language and academic hurdles. Students who arrive in the United States having completed their secondary education abroad may be prepared academically but often lack English proficiency. They may also face documentation challenges and be unfamiliar with U.S. educational customs. The available national and institutional data rarely distinguish among these populations, although the needs of each, while overlapping, are quite distinct.

The best estimate is that in 2003–04, about a quarter of the nation's 6.5 million degree-seeking community college students came from an immigrant background.¹¹ Some studies specific to certain states or community college systems cite a much higher proportional representation. A study of the 25,173 students in the freshman class at the City University of New York (CUNY) system in 1997 found that 59.9 percent of the foreign-born students began in an associate's degree program. Among the foreign-born, a greater proportion of first-time students who attended high school outside the United States began CUNY in an associate's program (66.5 percent) than those who attended high school in it (58.5 percent).¹² The proportion of immigrants who were low-income

and therefore eligible for Pell grants (the largest federal program that subsidizes college costs for low-income students) was similar to the proportion of low-income native-born students.¹³

Researchers have found significant differences in college participation among immigrant students by racial and ethnic background. One study differentiated institutional representation of immigrant and native-born students using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88),¹⁴ which includes a national longitudinal sample of eighth-grade students first interviewed in 1988 and followed up four times between 1988 and 2000. For all high school graduates, immigrants were more likely than native-born students of the same racial or ethnic group to enroll in any form of postsecondary education.

Data from the same study for high school graduates who attended college show obvious and important trends in the type of college attended by first-generation immigrants and the native-born. Among Latino immigrants who went to college, 57.9 percent attended community colleges or vocational programs, compared with only 50.5 percent of native-born Latinos who went to college.¹⁵ Similarly, Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants were more likely to be enrolled in community colleges or vocational programs (32.3 percent) than their native-born counterparts (23.7 percent). Conversely, a greater proportion of native-born blacks attended community colleges (32.8 percent) than foreign-born blacks (20.9 percent).

Research that compares foreign-born and native-born college students reveals both the resiliency of foreign-born students as well as the unique challenges they face. Immigrant college students are at higher

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risk of dropping out of college than native-born students. More than half of immigrants in college, for example, are over the age of twenty-four, one-third have dependents, and three-quarters work either part or full time while attending college as part-time students¹⁶—all characteristics that are risk factors for dropping out of college. A study in California found that Mexican and Central American immigrant students often had obligations and responsibilities to their family, including running errands, caring for siblings, translating for their parents, and contributing to the household income; similar obligations may not be as likely among native-born students.¹⁷ Another study of college students in New York City found that immigrant college students spent as many as fifteen hours more a week on family responsibilities than did their native-born peers.¹⁸

Nevertheless, within the major racial and ethnic groups, foreign-born students experience success on an array of postsecondary indicators, including credit accumulation, degree attainment, and transfer rates, which are equal to or exceed those of their native-born counterparts.¹⁹ In other words, some studies have found that foreign-born students exhibit rates of persistence and degree attainment that are similar to or greater than their native-born counterparts.²⁰

Student Needs

Like community college students generally, many immigrant students are not well prepared academically for college coursework. Before they can enroll in college-level courses, these students often need remedial education, which has been found to be correlated with low rates of persistence and degree attainment. In a longitudinal study of community college students, less than 25 percent of students who began community college in remedial courses completed a degree or certificate within eight years, compared with 40 percent of community college students who did not enroll in any remedial courses as first-time freshmen.²¹ The effects of remediation on persistence and degree attainment are particularly salient issues for immigrants who arrived with all or some of their schooling outside the United States, and for those who attended U.S. schools with inadequate resources and limited access to academic enrichment.²² In a study of a single urban community college, 85 percent of immigrants required remediation as first-time freshmen, often as a result of deficient English-language skills, compared with 55 percent of native-born students.²³

Not surprisingly, immigrant students in community colleges have a wide range of language-related needs. In 2006, for example, approximately half of foreign-born adults age twenty-five or older had limited English proficiency; the Asian American foreign-born population alone spoke more than 300 languages. We deal with language issues in more detail below and simply stipulate here that one of the greatest needs of immigrant students is to improve their English-language skills. If community colleges are to serve immigrant students effectively, they have no choice but to provide instruction in English-language skills.

Affordability also figures importantly in the decision of immigrants to attend community college. While immigrant adults have a lower unemployment rate than native-born adults, their wages are consistently lower. The median weekly wage for immigrants, for example, was 25 percent less than for native-born workers in 2005 (\$511 versus \$677).²⁴ Latino immigrants had a particularly low weekly wage of \$412, 39 percent less than native-born workers. Lower wages among immigrant adults make it difficult for them or their children to afford college.

Many immigrant students have great financial need but often lack information about how to finance college costs. They are less likely than other students to apply for student loans; research shows that they borrow less and cover more of their college cost themselves.²⁵ Both financially independent immigrant adults and the children of immigrants underuse financial aid, and many experience confusion about access to aid because of their own U.S. resident status or that of their parents.²⁶ While naturalized citizens and legal permanent residents are typically eligible for in-state tuition, nonpermanent residents and undocumented students are treated differently from one state to the next. Undocumented students are ineligible for federal aid and for most forms of state aid, a penalty that greatly limits their opportunities for postsecondary education.²⁷

Expanding Opportunities and Improving Outcomes

The barriers that immigrant students face in obtaining a postsecondary education have long-term economic and social consequences, not only for the students personally but also for the nation as a whole. Community colleges provide immigrants with access to degrees, certificates, and noncredit courses,

which are all correlated with better outcomes in the workforce. In this section, we examine how state and postsecondary institution practices and policies affect the opportunities and outcomes of immigrant youth.

Expanding Opportunities through Outreach

Jeffrey Passel writes, “By 2050 immigrant youth [including U.S.-born to immigrant parents] are likely to represent about one-third of all children.”²⁸ Thus, given the widely accepted national goal of increasing the educational attainment of the nation’s young adults, higher education institutions should make it a priority to expand access and opportunities for this large and growing pool of immigrant youth. Creating more college opportunities is particularly important for Latinos, given that a large share of Latino high school graduates is not attending college.²⁹ Low college enrollment rates are also characteristic of other immigrant groups of color, but not to the same extent as Latinos. A postsecondary education affords all immigrants, including Latinos, a range of opportunities including social integration, civic engagement, and workforce preparation. Given their affordability, accessibility, open enrollment, and flexibility, community colleges are a particularly important route to postsecondary education for immigrants.

Outreach programs can help immigrants in secondary school better define their objectives in attending college. The role of outreach is of particular importance for students and families who have limited access to information, knowledge, and resources that are necessary to make the transition from high school to college³⁰ and is of utmost importance for those immigrant students who are the first in their families to attend college. In New York City, for example, the New York

Immigrant Coalition targets college outreach services to immigrant students by providing them with mentors “who guide them through the process of applying to college and help them deal with circumstances unique to their status as immigrants.”³¹

The University of California’s Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP), which is the state’s oldest and largest outreach initiative, serves both middle and high school students. This program, while not targeted specifically at immigrant populations, assists students and families with academic and financial planning, helps students complete college applications, and conducts college visits and educational field trips. Through targeted services at low-performing schools, these programs are reaching immigrant students of color who will pursue both two-year and four-year degrees. Research has found that EAOP students are more academically prepared for college and have a higher college attendance rate than non-participants.³² In 2002, 33 percent of EAOP students attended a public four-year college in California, and an additional 15 percent attended a community college.³³

Accelerated “pathways to college” programs that combine high-intensity instruction with curricular and precollege efforts aim to improve academic preparation for immigrant students during high school while strengthening their postsecondary aspirations and expectations. A program called College Now exposes public high school students to college-level coursework and college enrichment through a partnership between the City University of New York and the New York City public schools. Students in College Now have opportunities to take college courses for credit during high school and to attend events on college campuses. Although the program

is not targeted specifically at immigrants, it reaches these populations because more than 60 percent of New York City's public school students are immigrants.³⁴ Through partnerships with community-based outreach programs that work with immigrants, resources can target immigrants through programming that supports their unique needs. One of these partnerships, between Asian Americans

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for Equality and two public high schools in Queens, provides targeted services for immigrant youth such as college outreach, informal gatherings, field trips, and information sessions for the students and their families. Although rigorous evaluation of these outreach programs is needed, these efforts seem to be effective in boosting the postsecondary enrollment of underrepresented minorities, including immigrants.³⁵

Another example of targeted services for immigrants with a college outreach component can be found at Triton College in Illinois. The program, called Nuevos Horizontes, offers citizenship classes, parenting workshops, academic counseling, cultural events, and tutoring in Spanish, English, and math in a culturally friendly atmosphere for immigrant students and families.³⁶ These services help respond to the frequent lack of

connection between immigrant families and social services and school personnel, increasing the information and knowledge critical for immigrant students and families to access resources and opportunities.³⁷

Financial Aid and Tuition Policy

One key to participation and persistence for many college students is their knowledge of, access to, and use of financial aid. Increasing knowledge about and awareness of financial aid for immigrant students and their families is essential. Although immigrant students often have greater financial need than non-immigrants, many challenges are also associated with the perceptions immigrant students and their parents have about college costs and access to aid. One study found that half of immigrant student respondents indicated that federal and state financial aid was not available to legal residents and 25 percent of the respondents thought that their parents needed to be citizens for them to receive aid, neither of which is true.³⁸ So, even for immigrants who are permanent residents, there is a need to improve knowledge of financial aid. Government, the private sector, and two- and four-year colleges themselves can support programs to inform immigrant families about their options and can also offer assistance in navigating the financial aid system.³⁹

Financial aid poses a particular challenge for undocumented immigrants. In the 1990s, states began to impose residency restrictions that disqualified undocumented immigrants for in-state tuition rates and financial aid.⁴⁰ Section 505 of the federal Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 specified that unauthorized aliens “shall not be eligible on the basis of residence within a state (or political subdivision) for any postsecondary education benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is

eligible for such a benefit.”⁴¹ This law was met with different interpretations from one state to the next.

In 2001, after unsuccessful attempts by some members of Congress to repeal Section 505, states began creating their own in-state resident tuition legislation to support undocumented high school graduates. Ten states—including California, Illinois, New York, and Texas, which have large populations of undocumented immigrants—allowed unauthorized college students to establish residency and to pay the lower, in-state tuition. New York, for example, offers in-state tuition to undocumented students if they “enroll in college within five years of graduating from a New York high school they attended for at least two years ... and ... file an affidavit stating that they will apply for legal immigration status.”⁴² Fourteen additional states are debating similar bills. In several studies, extending in-state tuition for undocumented students has been linked with increased participation in college.⁴³ Neeraj Kaushal analyzed outcomes specifically for Mexican noncitizens and concluded that offering in-state tuition is associated with increases in college enrollment, the number of students with at least some college education, and the proportion of Mexican noncitizens with at least an associate’s degree.⁴⁴

Critics of in-state tuition policies suggest that supporting illegal immigrants creates an incentive for additional foreign-born youth to migrate to the United States for education, while deflecting resources from native-born students. Supporters of in-state tuition programs for undocumented residents argue, in rebuttal, that most undocumented immigrants stay in the United States regardless of educational attainment and that states

should maximize their human capital and economic potential by offering the undocumented a chance to improve their education. Although research about the validity of either position is limited, a legal case recently decided by the California Supreme Court, *Martinez v. Regents of the University of California*, upheld the provisions of the California state statute according undocumented students and others in-state resident tuition status. The ruling overturned an appellate decision that found the provision in violation of state and federal law. The statute allows those who attended California high schools for three years and graduated to establish in-state residency.

Because of their low tuition, community colleges are more accessible to undocumented youth who lack financial aid than are four-year colleges. The federal DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act), which has been introduced in Congress many times since 2003 but never enacted, would make postsecondary education (at minimum, an associate’s degree) or military service a viable path toward citizenship for undocumented immigrants. The DREAM Act could produce significant increases in immigrant enrollment at community colleges if it eventually becomes law.⁴⁵

The outcome of legislation like the DREAM Act aside, states, higher education systems, and other educational institutions can still be responsive to the needs of immigrant students. Community colleges themselves can conduct fundraising campaigns to provide financial scholarships for immigrants and undocumented students.⁴⁶ They can also provide financial assistance through services such as transportation and child care.⁴⁷ These services are particularly

important for institutions where immigrants and undocumented students constitute a high proportion of their total enrollment. Although state and local governments and most of the nation's colleges and universities are now under financial pressure as a result of the Great Recession, the American economy will eventually rebound. That will be the moment when proposals to provide additional help to the nation's immigrant postsecondary students—including the undocumented—should receive careful attention by policy makers.

Because community colleges rely on state financial support, they are vulnerable to changes in state funding for higher education, which is the largest discretionary item in state budgets.⁴⁸ As four-year institutions increasingly restrict enrollment and as community colleges remain largely open access, it is important that tuition remain low for community college students. More specific to immigrants in community colleges, reform is needed so that federal and state aid can cover tuition for English as a Second Language (ESL) courses and remediation. Federal Pell grants, for example, may be used to fund no more than thirty credit hours of remedial, non-credit-bearing courses. This limitation is problematic for students who are required to enroll in a series of remedial education courses in each subject area. The use of Pell grants to finance ESL instruction should be broadened.⁴⁹

Language Programs

Immigrants' command of English affects their ability to understand content in the classroom as well as to participate fully in the workforce and society. Academic language proficiency is *sine qua non* for academic engagement and success.⁵⁰ Indeed, many immigrants attend community colleges

specifically to improve their English language skills.⁵¹ ESL courses provide immigrants with a range of benefits in addition to the development of language skills, including opportunities to receive peer support and informal counseling from their ESL instructors.⁵² These programs are not without their challenges, however. In addition to a shortage of ESL faculty, low levels of funding, and few ESL courses that offer college-level credit, attrition rates in ESL courses are often high. Because ESL courses are usually prerequisites for college-level courses, these high attrition rates are a serious problem.⁵³

To ensure immigrants' access to high-quality English language programs in community colleges, college leaders and government policy makers should be willing to fund high-quality adult ESL instruction. Federal programs like "English Language Civics" (designed for citizenship classes but usable for more general ESL instruction) can help offset costs to institutions. In general, appropriations for ESL infrastructure by local and state governments should be increased.⁵⁴

Within community colleges themselves, high-intensity language programs can extend students' learning outside the classroom by using different curricula to meet the needs of various types of immigrant students. For example, one curriculum could be offered for immediate job marketability and another for eventual transfer to academic courses.⁵⁵ A strong recruitment and counseling system can increase the rate at which noncredit ESL students transition into academic courses.

One such strategy is the "bridge" programs that integrate English-language skills with content knowledge.⁵⁶ These programs enroll students in ESL and academic classes

concurrently, so ESL students can begin to earn credit toward a degree or certificate while they improve their mastery of the English language. The Accelerated Content-Based English (ACE) Program at Miami Dade College, for example, offers a fast-track curriculum to immigrants with stronger academic backgrounds, including those with degrees from their countries of origin. This accelerated option features content-based instruction in which students learn English at the same time they are studying academic subjects such as psychology or biology. Another program, the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP), is a noncredit program in which first-time college students acquire English-language skills by learning about the arts, humanities, and sciences. In addition, students acquire technology, research, and study skills; learn about citizenship requirements; and gain exposure to American higher education and culture, career opportunities, and resources in New York through guest speakers and field trips. While there is little research on the CLIP program, CUNY claims that most CLIP participants eventually transfer to CUNY degree programs.⁵⁷

Community colleges should also take action to hire more ESL faculty and to improve their preparation for teaching English to immigrant students. Hiring more ESL faculty would not only augment instructional offerings but also help to establish a more robust language program beyond classes. Recruiting high-quality faculty who recognize the role they can play beyond teaching content to students is also key. Research has found that ESL faculty can provide encouragement and guidance to language minority students.⁵⁸ High-quality faculty are essential to the effectiveness of ESL programs in terms of student learning gains, retention, and transition

to regular academic classes. Although the research on qualifications of effective faculty members is thin, some experts recommend that all ESL faculty have a master's degree in either Teachers of English to Students of Other Languages or applied linguistics, as well as experience working with adult ESL students. They also recommend that ESL courses and resources be placed in academic departments with tenure-track faculty positions, rather than in an English department, a remedial education department, or an adjunct division. These recommendations seem reasonable, but until more research is conducted, it is difficult to determine whether they will boost the English skills of immigrant students.

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Academic Advising and Support Services

Community colleges should provide counseling, orientation, and academic planning tailored to the needs of immigrant students. According to one study, high-quality academic advising is a strong positive determinant of student persistence; conversely, inadequate advice is the single strongest negative determinant.⁵⁹ High-quality advising and support services are of particular importance for immigrants in community colleges because the unique needs and the risks they face often translate into delayed matriculation and lower rates of progress during college. One project

that is targeting counseling in community colleges is the Opening Doors program, which gives community college students access to academic counselors with whom they are expected to meet at least two times a semester for two semesters. The Opening Doors program is testing a model of greater access to counseling accompanied by a modest cash reward for completing coursework with a passing grade. Findings from these programs, based on rigorous research, show that students in the program exhibit greater persistence and earn more academic credits than students who are not receiving these services and cash payments.⁶⁰

Some newer models for counseling in community colleges use cohort approaches similar to those in selective four-year institutions with more homogeneous student populations. Freshman success programs give students opportunities for college orientation, counseling, and participation in learning communities. For students struggling to maintain academic progress, advisers make use of supplemental instruction, language and reading labs, and social networks. A high-quality study by MDRC of a learning community program at Kingsborough Community College in New York City, which is composed predominately of immigrant students, found that the program improved students' integration and engagement with the campus community, improved their persistence and credit accumulation, and resulted in greater success in remedial English.⁶¹

Although counseling services are showing signs of effectiveness for community college students generally, there is a need for more research that looks specifically at the impact of these innovative counseling services on immigrant student populations, particularly for institutions that serve large

concentrations of immigrants and language minorities. Research is needed on counseling that is delivered in students' native language and on counseling aimed at students enrolled in bilingual education and ESL courses.

One area of counseling for immigrants that is emerging in a number of community colleges is career placement, which involves matching the abilities and backgrounds of immigrants to particular occupations. One program, Northern Virginia Community College's ESL for Employment Initiative, enrolls ESL students in a sixty-hour noncredit course to help participants master English and the cultural competencies needed for entry-level, career-track jobs. The program also provides the language and cultural competencies needed for job search and exposes students to volunteers from the business community through job fairs. Although these services are often provided by community-based organizations, community colleges provide a venue to centralize these services for local immigrant communities. As we have emphasized repeatedly, programs like this one seem to provide needed services to immigrant students, but until they are assessed by high-quality evaluation designs we cannot confidently claim that they actually help these students.

Finally, immigrant students are best served by counselors who are trained to address the specific psychological needs associated with immigration itself. Forthcoming research by Carola Suárez-Orozco, Hee Jin Bang, and H. K. Kim finds that large shares of immigrant children and youth undergo long periods of separation from their parents that result in stress, anxiety, depression, and withdrawal.⁶² Many immigrant students juggle their academic responsibilities with financial and family responsibilities, which can result in additional stress and can distract

them from their college studies.⁶³ Research has found that immigrant college students experience challenges related to adjustment, isolation, and poor self-efficacy.⁶⁴ Responding to these needs may warrant a team-based approach that includes counselors and faculty who can help make the classroom a safe environment for peer support and informal counseling in which students converse with and learn from each other.⁶⁵

Conclusion

With America's immigrant population at its highest number ever and growing rapidly, and with many nationality groups falling behind in educational attainment, postsecondary educational institutions could play a much greater role in helping immigrants achieve levels of education that will boost both their income and economic integration into American society. The immigrant population is diverse, geographically dispersed, and constantly in flux, which presents a complex set of challenges to which higher education must respond. More so than any other sector of higher education, community colleges play an important role in responding to these challenges, particularly the needs of immigrant and undocumented students to improve their English-language skills and to become familiar with U.S. educational practices while juggling multiple responsibilities.

Unfortunately, the potential of immigrant youth is often unrealized, and their dreams are thwarted. The barriers they often face stand in painful conflict with American

ideals and have unfortunate consequences for society and the economy. At a time when international competition demands that the nation increase the proportion of the population that has a college degree, immigrants are being neglected and their potential is being overlooked. Policy makers and community college leaders must find ways to enroll more immigrant students and to ensure that a much higher percentage of them complete at least an associate's degree.

It is equally important for the research community to work more closely with community colleges to evaluate and assess the effectiveness of efforts to increase the educational achievement and degree completion of immigrant students. There is simply a dearth of research to inform a broad understanding of the experiences and outcomes of immigrant students in community colleges, including the demography of the immigrant student population and the array of unique challenges this population presents for individual campuses, states, and the nation's higher education priorities generally.

With greater attention and responsiveness to immigrants in community colleges, and higher education as a whole, immigrants will be more productive and better contributors to the well-being of society. In other words, responding more effectively to their aspirations and potential will result not only in personal gain for these students and their families but also in gains for our nation as a whole.

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