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Immigrant-Origin Students in U.S. Higher Education

A Data Profile

FACT SHEET

OCTOBER 2020

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many dilemmas for institutions of higher education, ranging from finding the best instructional models to promote student learning while keeping students and staff safe; to needing to provide greater levels of social, mental, and technology support; to chasing financial stability during the pandemic-related economic downturn. While these challenges are large and urgent, equipping students with education and skills remains a priority because they will play an important role in both the eventual economic recovery and the longer-term future of the U.S. workforce.

More than 5.3 million students, or 28 percent of all students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 2018, were from immigrant families.

One key group is immigrant-origin students—that is, those born abroad (i.e., the first generation) and U.S.-born students with immigrant parents (the second generation). These students accounted for 58 percent of the increase in the number of students in U.S. higher education between 2000 and 2018, and immigrant-origin workers are projected to drive U.S. labor force growth until at least 2035. Within the first generation, this analysis looks specifically at "domestic" students and excludes international students in order to focus on established U.S. residents who are in the country for more than an education.

Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data shows that more than 5.3 million students, or 28 percent of all students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 2018, were from immigrant families, up from 20 percent in 2000. This population grew much faster than native-born students with U.S.-born parents (i.e., the third or higher generation). As a group of interest to policymakers, higher education administrators, and advocates, immigrant-origin students sit at the intersection of three policy issues:

- **States' postsecondary credential attainment policies.** Immigrant-origin students make up large shares of postsecondary students in a variety of traditional and newer immigrant destination states. In California, they accounted for about half of all students in 2018. In another eight states (Hawaii, Nevada, Florida, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Washington, and Texas), the proportion of students from immigrant families ranged from 30 percent to 40 percent. And in 32 states, at least 20,000 immigrant-origin students were enrolled in postsecondary education. Most of these states have ambitious higher education goals aimed at raising the number of their adult

residents who enroll in higher education programs and graduate with marketable postsecondary credentials, and immigrant-origin residents are important target groups for these policies.

- **Racial equity efforts.** Immigrant-origin students are a diverse group and account for a large share of students who are racial and ethnic minorities. As of 2018, 85 percent of Asian American and Pacific Islander students were members of the first or second generation, as were 63 percent of Latino students and 24 percent of Black students. In comparison, 10 percent of White students were from immigrant families. Renewed protests against systemic racism have further elevated issues of racial inequity in all spheres of U.S. society, including students' access to and completion of higher education.
- **Immigration policies.** Of the 5.3 million immigrant-origin students nationwide in 2018, a lion's share were U.S.-born citizens (68 percent) and another 16 percent were naturalized U.S. citizens. While these students have the same rights and benefits as U.S.-born students with native-born parents, their social and economic trajectories are tied to those of their immigrant families. Some Trump administration policies, such as changes to the public-charge rule, although they do not specifically target immigrant-origin students, are likely to have a negative impact on some students by reducing their families' ability to afford postsecondary education. Restrictions on legal immigration may also be reflected in the size of the immigrant-origin student population in years to come.

The face of U.S. higher education is changing. Students are more likely to come from immigrant families than in the past, and they are more likely to be racial and ethnic minorities. The future health of the U.S. economy is connected to investments in higher education and in growing the proportion of individuals, including those from immigrant families, who access postsecondary learning and gain valuable skills and credentials.

1 Introduction

Almost 19 million students attended U.S. colleges and universities in 2018.[1] Extensive U.S. and international research demonstrates the long-term economic advantages of higher levels of education for individuals, families, and societies as a whole.[2] In the United States and other high-income countries, people with higher levels of education are much more likely to participate in the labor force, earn more, and are less likely to be unemployed, compared to their less-educated counterparts. Data collected since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic tell a similar story: Even though all U.S. workers have suffered from pandemic-related job losses, the impact was less severe for those with postsecondary degrees.[3] Looking ahead, the economic premium of higher education and life-long learning is likely to keep growing. The jobs of the future, shaped by automation, artificial intelligence, and other technological developments, will largely require a medium to high level of skills.[4]

The U.S. workforce is also poised to undergo significant changes in the coming years as a result of broader demographic trends in the country. Research shows that declining fertility and population aging, on the one hand, and the strong growth of the immigrant-origin population (that is, immigrants and the U.S.-born children of immigrants), on the other hand, mean that all net labor force growth in the United States over the next 15 years is expected to come from immigrant-origin workers.[5] A similar trend can already be seen in U.S. higher education. Immigrant-origin students have helped drive growth

BOX 1
Defining the Study Population

This study describes the profile of adults ages 16 to 54 who have at least a high school diploma or equivalent and who were enrolled in college or university at the time of the survey. The analysis breaks this population down by immigrant generation:

- **First generation.** Immigrants, or the first generation, are persons with no U.S. citizenship at birth. Immigrants include naturalized U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents (or green-card holders), refugees and other humanitarian immigrants, persons on certain temporary visas, and unauthorized immigrants. International students, who are often included in estimates of the first-generation immigrant population, are excluded from this analysis. (See the Appendix for details on estimating the number of "domestic" higher education students.)
- **Second generation.** This generation is composed of persons born in the United States to one or more immigrant parents.
- **Third or higher generation.** Members of this generation were born in the United States to only U.S.-born parents.

The first and second generations, together, make up what this fact sheet refers to as the "immigrant-origin population" and "students from immigrant families."

in postsecondary enrollment nationwide and across many states, as this analysis will show.

The increasing presence of immigrant-origin students in colleges and universities across the nation, and the important role they will play in the future of the U.S. economy, calls for a greater understanding of the characteristics of and trends within this population (see Box 1 for definitions). Analyzing data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2000 and 2018 Current Population Survey (CPS) and other sources, this fact sheet estimates the number of immigrant-origin students and their share of all students enrolled in postsecondary education, both nationwide and by state. It examines trends in the enrollment of these students, by immigrant generation, since 2000. The fact sheet also describes the demographic and enrollment characteristics of immigrant-origin students, drawing comparisons with their fellow students who are part of the third generation or higher. (Details on the data and methods used can be found in the Appendix.) The analysis excludes international students, whose main purpose of arriving in the United States is to obtain an education, and instead focuses on "domestic students," who are an established part of U.S. society and who are either current or future U.S. workers.

2 Demographic Profile of Immigrant-Origin Students

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic swept into the United States in early 2020, casting uncertainty over how colleges and universities should operate during a public-health crisis, many shared concerns about the future of student recruitment and retention.[6] Lower birth rates in prior decades have resulted in declining numbers of high school graduates in recent years. The number of nontraditional students—those who are adult learners, study part-time because of work or family obligations, and/or take longer to graduate—has also grown rapidly.[7] Many of these nontraditional students are low income and

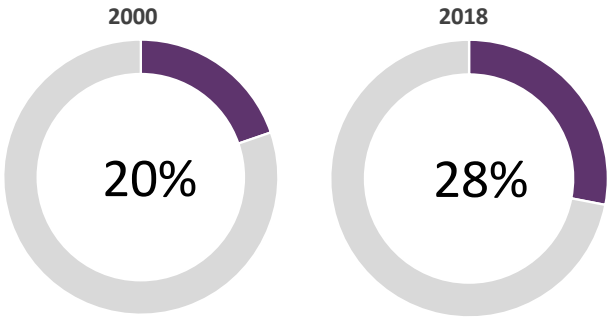
are racial and ethnic minorities, with students from immigrant families well represented among them.

A. *Population Size and Growth over Time*

Immigrant-origin students account for a growing share of all postsecondary students in the United States. In 2000, 14.9 million students were enrolled in postsecondary education, of whom 20 percent were immigrants or the U.S.-born children of immigrants (approximately 2.9 million students). By 2018, more than 5.3 million immigrant-origin students were pursuing higher education, representing 28 percent of the 19 million students nationwide (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Immigrant-Origin Share of Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, 2000 and 2018



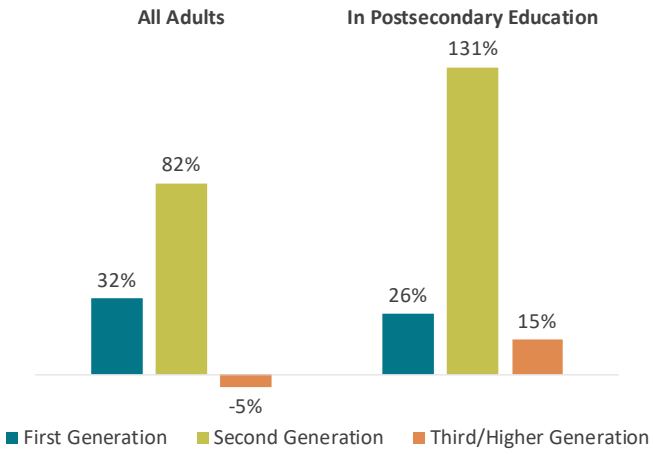
Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) October 2000 and October 2018 Educational Supplement.

The growth in the number of first- and second-generation students from 2.9 million in 2000 to 5.3 million in 2018 amounts to an 82-percent increase in the size of this student population. During the same period, the number of third/higher-generation students increased at a more modest pace (15 percent). Immigrant-origin students have thus helped drive enrollment in higher education, accounting for 58 percent of the increase in U.S. students pursing higher education in the past two decades.

Among immigrant-origin students in 2000, the first and second generations were relatively similar in size: close to 1.6 million students were members of the second generation while approximately 1.4 million were first-generation immigrants. Since then, the second generation has grown much faster—among both students in higher education and all U.S. adults—compared to their first- and third/higher-generation counterparts. As shown in Figure 2, the number of students who were members of the second generation grew by 131 percent between 2000 and 2018, compared to 26 percent among those who were first-generation immigrants and 15 percent among the third/higher generation. By 2018, the 3.6 million U.S.-born students from immigrant families (i.e., the second generation) were more than twice the size of the population of first-generation immigrant students (1.7 million).

FIGURE 2

Population Change between 2000 and 2018: All Adults and Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, by Immigrant Generation



Source: MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2000 and 2018 Educational Supplement.

The number of second-generation students in higher education will likely continue to grow, at least for the next decade, given the large cohort of children under age 18 who were born in the United States to immigrant parents (17.4 million children as of 2018).[8] The picture in the medium to long term is less certain. The wide-ranging restrictions placed on legal immigration by the Trump administration have reduced the inflow of immigrants and refugees into the country since 2017 and are likely to have lasting impacts.[9] Coupled with declining fertility among both native-born and immigrant populations,[10] reduced immigration may translate to lower postsecondary enrollments in the longer term.[11]

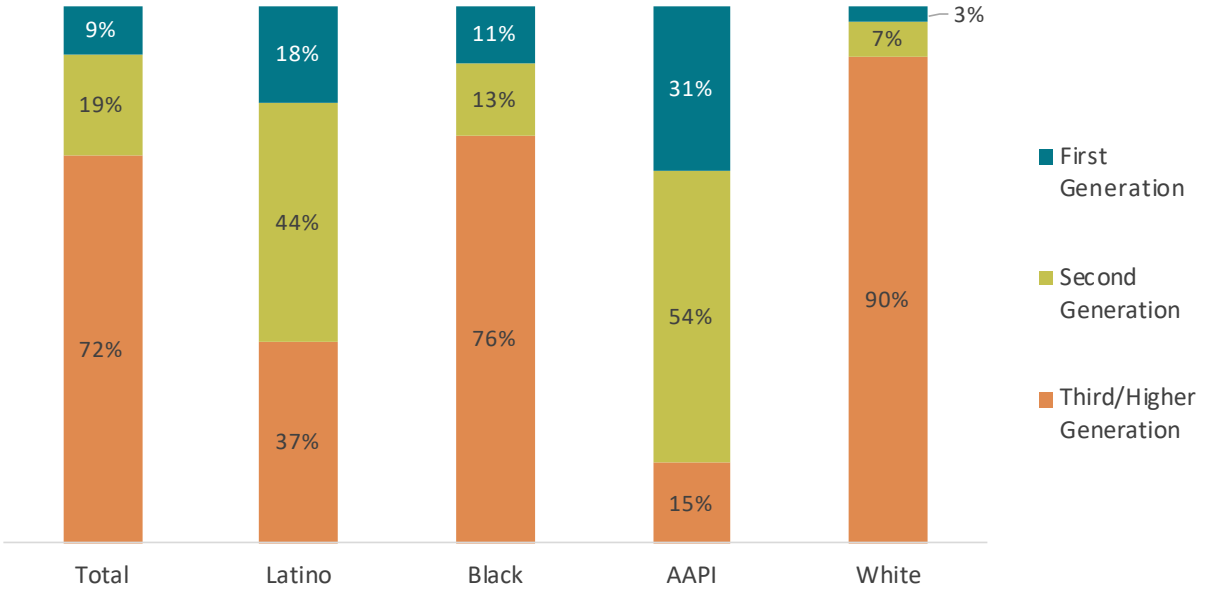
B. Race and Ethnicity

In 2018, while immigrant-origin students accounted for 28 percent of all postsecondary students, they represented much higher shares among some racial and ethnic minority groups (see Figure 3). Immigrants and U.S.-born children of immigrants made up 85 percent of all Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students and 63 percent of Latino students. Meanwhile, 24 percent of Black students were from immigrant families, compared to 76 percent who were U.S. born to U.S.-born parents.[12]

Looking across immigrant generations, immigrant-origin students are more likely to be AAPI or Latino than third/higher-generation students. Among first-generation immigrant students in 2018, 39 percent were Latino, 24 percent were AAPI, 18 percent were Black, and 17 percent were White (see Table 1). The second generation, by comparison, had somewhat larger shares of Latino and White students (45 percent and 19 percent, respectively), but smaller shares of AAPI students (20 percent) and Black students (10 percent). Third/higher-generation students were predominantly White (70 percent), followed by Black and Latino students (with 16 percent and 10 percent, respectively).

FIGURE 3

Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, by Race/Ethnicity and Immigrant Generation, 2018



AAPI = Asian American and Pacific Islander.
Source: MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2018 Educational Supplement.

TABLE 1

Racial and Ethnic Composition of Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, by Immigrant Generation, 2018

	Immigrant-Origin Students			Third/Higher Generation
	All	First Generation	Second Generation	
All Students	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
Latino	43%	39%	45%	10%
Black	13%	18%	10%	16%
Asian American and Pacific Islander	22%	24%	20%	1%
White	19%	17%	19%	70%
Other	4%	1%	5%	3%

Source: MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2018 Educational Supplement.

C. U.S. Citizenship and Legal Status for First-Generation Immigrant Students

Of the 1.7 million immigrant students in 2018, half were naturalized U.S. citizens. The other half included students who were green-card holders (i.e., legal permanent residents); refugees, asylees, and other humanitarian migrants; and unauthorized immigrants. More broadly, of the 5.3 million immigrant-origin students in 2018, 68 percent were U.S. citizens by birth and another 16 percent were citizens by naturalization. Thus, while unauthorized immigrant students, including those eligible for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), have received much attention from higher education policymakers and the public because of their unique situation, it is noteworthy that immigrant-origin students are overwhelmingly U.S. citizens or otherwise legally present.

3 Top States with Immigrant-Origin Students

By absolute size, immigrant-origin students are concentrated in a few states, though they make up significant shares of college and university students in states across the country. In 2018, California had the largest number of students from immigrant families, with nearly 1.4 million, accounting for 25 percent of all immigrant-origin students in the United States. It is followed by Texas (with 11 percent of immigrant-origin students), and New York and Florida (with 9 percent each). Colleges and universities in these top four states enrolled 54 percent of all students from immigrant families nationwide.

California, Florida, and New York were also among the top five states in which the immigrant-origin share of all postsecondary students was highest (see Table 2). While the national immigrant-origin share of students was 28 percent as of 2018, 50 percent of Californian students were immigrants or the children of immigrants. The other states in which high proportions of postsecondary students were from immigrant families represent a mix of traditional and relatively new immigrant destinations: Immigrant-origin students made up about 40 percent of students in Hawaii, Nevada, and Florida, and between 30 percent and 39 percent in New York State, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Washington State, and Texas.

In 21 states, immigrant-origin students account for at least 15 percent of postsecondary enrollments. And in 32 states, at least 20,000 such students were

TABLE 2

Number of Immigrant-Origin Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education and Their Share of All Students, Selected States,* 2018

	Immigrant-Origin Students	
	Number	Share of All Students
United States	**5,316,000**	**28%**
California	1,352,000	50%
Hawaii	28,000	40%
Nevada	65,000	40%
Florida	487,000	40%
New York State	488,000	39%
New Jersey	215,000	36%
Massachusetts	143,000	34%
Washington State	122,000	32%
Texas	559,000	32%
Connecticut	52,000	29%
Arizona	112,000	27%
Maryland	111,000	27%
Virginia	124,000	27%
Illinois	214,000	26%
Oregon	56,000	25%
Michigan	86,000	17%
Colorado	60,000	17%
New Mexico	20,000	16%
Pennsylvania	117,000	16%
Georgia	92,000	16%
North Carolina	95,000	15%
Iowa	24,000	14%
Minnesota	39,000	13%
Utah	27,000	13%
Arkansas	20,000	12%
Kentucky	24,000	10%
Louisiana	21,000	9%
Alabama	24,000	9%
Wisconsin	26,000	9%
Ohio	54,000	9%
Tennessee	27,000	7%
Indiana	24,000	7%

* The states included in this table are those with at least 20,000 immigrant-origin students.
Source: MPI analysis of monthly data (January to December) from the CPS 2018.

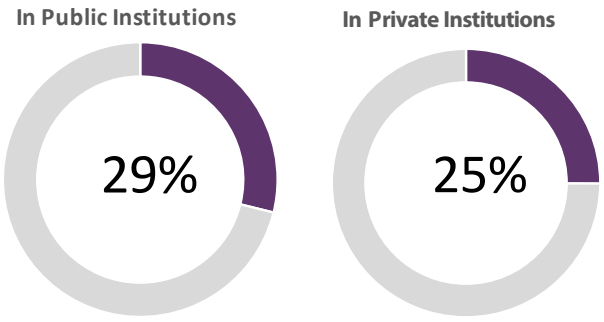
enrolled in higher education as of 2018 (see Table 2). Of these states, most (with the notable exceptions of California and New York) have established goals for increasing the share of their adult residents with postsecondary credentials.[13]

4 Enrollment Characteristics

In 2018, 29 percent of all students in public higher education institutions and 25 percent of those in private schools were from immigrant families (see Figure 4). In turn, immigrant-origin students were slightly more likely to pursue higher education at public colleges and universities than students from the third/higher generation. Among immigrant-origin students, 83 percent were enrolled in public institutions versus 17 percent in private ones. Meanwhile, 80 percent of third/higher-generation students were enrolled at public institutions, and 20 percent attended private schools.

FIGURE 4

Immigrant-Origin Share of All Students Enrolled in Public and Private Institutions of Higher Education, 2018



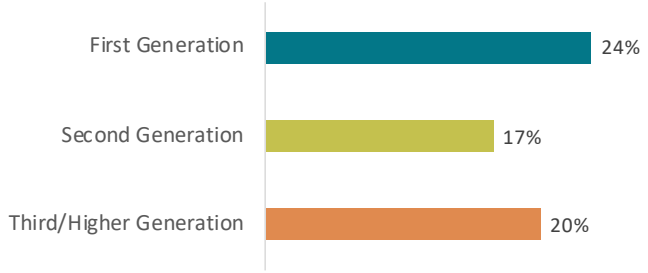
Source: MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2018 Educational Supplement.

As with the postsecondary student population overall, the great majority of immigrant-origin students in 2018 (81 percent) were undergraduates,

while 19 percent were enrolled in graduate programs. The breakdown for students from the third/higher generation was nearly the same (80 percent versus 20 percent). However, when looking only at first-generation immigrant students, they were more likely to be pursuing graduate and professional degrees than either second- or third/higher-generation students (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Share of Postsecondary Students Enrolled in Graduate-Level Programs, by Immigrant Generation, 2018



Source: MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2018 Educational Supplement.

5 Conclusion

More than 5.3 million students from immigrant families attended U.S. colleges and universities in 2018, representing 28 percent of all U.S. postsecondary students. Immigrant-origin students have come to play a significant role in postsecondary enrollment, accounting for almost 60 percent of the growth of the student population between 2000 and 2018. Examining the demographics, geographic distribution, and enrollment characteristics of these students can help higher education practitioners and state education policymakers more fully understand their relevance to institutional and state goals of equipping residents to meet the evolving demands of the U.S. and local economies, including during the post-pandemic recovery.

Over the past decade, more than 40 states, including some with large and well-established immigrant populations (Texas, Florida, and New Jersey, for example) as well as relatively new immigrant destinations (such as Georgia, Colorado, and Connecticut), have set goals to boost the share of their residents who hold a college degree or other postsecondary credential. In addition to responding to rising demand for high-skilled workers, these efforts reflect concerns about predictions that technological developments such as automation, coupled with trends such as offshoring, are likely to significantly reduce demand for lower-skilled workers and further raise the economic premium of higher education.[14]

Adult students and workers, regardless of their origins, will benefit from training and skills development programs that ensure program completion, provide marketable credentials, and assist in developing life-long learning skills. These skills are essential for being able to adapt to rapidly changing and unpredictable economic circumstances, as demonstrated by the unexpected and swift disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.[15] While in some states immigrant-origin students already make up large numbers or shares of postsecondary students—including at least 20,000 in 32 states, and more than 30 percent of students in nine states—many immigrant-origin adults could benefit from college completion initiatives and efforts to help students transition successfully into the changing labor market.

Immigrant-origin students have come to play a significant role in postsecondary enrollment, accounting for almost 60 percent of the growth of the student population between 2000 and 2018.

The renewed national conversation about racial equity and protests against systemic racism have brought a magnifying glass to many aspects of U.S. society, including education. Research shows sharp disparities in educational outcomes across groups, with Latino and Black students less likely to enroll in college and obtain a postsecondary education than their Asian and White counterparts.[16] And although postsecondary education attainment has been rising among all races and ethnicities in recent years, large gaps remain.[17] Immigrant-origin students are much more likely to be racial and ethnic minorities than U.S.-born students with native-born parents, as this analysis has shown. Efforts to combat educational and economic disadvantage, which tends to persist from parents to children,[18] and to support intergenerational mobility through education[19] are thus of relevance to many immigrant families. As states set and make progress toward their credential attainment goals, many also seek to reduce racial and social disparities in education access and completion. The immigrant-origin population represents a critical target population for such initiatives.[20]

Changes to immigration policies may also affect the ability of immigrant-origin students to enroll in and complete higher education,[21] even though the majority were born in the United States to immigrant parents and are thus U.S. citizens by birth. While generally not aimed at such students, immigration policies may nonetheless have a significant impact on some, including those in mixed-status families in which one or both parents is unauthorized as well as those whose family members are in the country legally but who fear the potential repercussions of accessing public supports. One example is the changes made in 2019 to the federal public-charge rule, which makes it harder for noncitizens who are using certain public benefits, or are deemed likely to use them in the future, to obtain a green card; although Pell Grants and other forms of educational aid are excluded from the list of public benefits considered by the policy, higher education experts and university administrators worry that the confusion and fear that surrounds the complex rule could deter some students in immigrant families from seeking financial aid—even if they are eligible for these resources.[22] More broadly, the policy will deter many immigrant families from applying for or staying enrolled in major public benefits programs, including food stamps and cash assistance, which may make it harder for members of low-income families to pursue a college education.[23] As a result of these chilling effects, fewer immigrant-origin students may be able to enroll in or continue their education at U.S. colleges and universities.

Given that immigrants and the U.S.-born children of immigrants are projected to be the main source of future U.S. labor force growth, investing in their education and skill development will benefit the U.S. economy and society, as well as these individuals and their families.

While it is hard to foresee how the coronavirus pandemic and the associated economic and social disruptions will affect the higher education system in the long term, pre-pandemic trends—such as declining fertility and population aging, the strong relationship between education and economic mobility, the push for racial equity, and structural shifts in the labor market in response to automation and other technological developments—will persist. And given that immigrants and the U.S.-born children of immigrants are projected to be the main source of future U.S. labor force growth, investing in their education and skill development will benefit the U.S. economy and society, as well as these individuals and their families.

Appendix. Data and Methods

The central data source for this analysis is the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) October Supplement. This supplement collects detailed data on school enrollment and educational attainment, including respondents' level of college enrollment and enrollment in private versus public schools, in addition to other sociodemographic and economic characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, U.S. citizenship status, and the nativity of respondents and their parents). The CPS has a nationally representative sample of about 50,000 households. Trends over time are examined by comparing 2000 and 2018 October CPS data. The data and analysis by state are based on monthly CPS 2018 data averaged across the year to boost the sample size and thus provide a greater degree of accuracy when describing smaller populations.

CPS estimates were somewhat lower than what the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported for postsecondary enrollment in Fall 2000 and 2018.[24] To account for these differences, CPS-based estimates were adjusted to match the official enrollment data from NCES.

Estimating "Domestic" Students

Because the goal of this study was to construct a profile of immigrant-origin students who are in the United States for more than just to study, it was necessary to exclude international students from these calculations. To do so, this analysis used two additional data sources to estimate the number of international students, and then to subtract them from the population of first-generation immigrant students.

To estimate the size of the domestic student population in 2000, the Migration Policy Institute researcher first calculated the international student share of all enrolled U.S. students (excluding those on Optional Practical Training), based on data reported by the Institute of International Education.[25] This international-student share of all students (3.4 percent) was then used to estimate the absolute number of international students among all enrolled students according to October 2000 CPS data (i.e., 3.4 percent of 15.3 million students, or 528,000). Finally, the researcher subtracted this number from the number of first-generation immigrant students, according to October 2000 CPS data, to calculate the number of immigrant students who were not international students (close to 1.4 million). A similar approach was used to estimate the size of the international student population in 2018, except that the researcher used the share of international students from estimates provided by New American Economy (NAE). The researcher estimated that about 1.7 million students were immigrants but not on student visas in 2018. Further, the researcher used NAE data on the share of international students by race/ethnicity, state of residence, enrollment in public and private institutions, and levels of enrollment to estimate the number of "domestic" students by these characteristics.

Endnotes

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Acknowledgments

Support for this research came from the Presidents' Alliance for Higher Education and Immigration. The authors thank Steven Hubbard and Andrew Lim of New American Economy for sharing their estimates of international students, and Christian Penichet-Paul of the Presidents' Alliance for Higher Education and Immigration for his support of this research. The authors also thank Michael Fix, Randy Capps, and Lauren Shaw of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) for their careful review of this fact sheet, and Liz Heimann for its layout.

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Design: Sara Staedicke, MPI
Layout: Liz Heimann

Suggested citation: Batalova, Jeanne with Miriam Feldblum. 2020. *Immigrant-Origin Students in U.S. Higher Education: A Data Profile.* Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

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