

PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE | ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION

Immigrant-origin achievements are part of the fabric of America

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Immigrant-origin individuals,¹ those who are first and second generation immigrants in the U.S. continue to play significant roles in the fields of technology, science, education, medicine, the liberal arts, as well as in entrepreneurship and founding businesses. Every campus, organization, or business has a story to tell about the impactful contributions made by their immigrant-origin leaders. Below, we highlight trends among MacArthur Fellows, Nobel Prize winners, college and university leaders, and founders of Fortune 500 businesses and billion-dollar startups.

MacArthur Fellows

Since 1981, the [MacArthur Foundation](#) has been awarding so-called “genius” grants to U.S. citizen and resident writers, social scientists, medical scientists, entrepreneurs, and more “who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction.”

In 2017, the [New York Times](#) reported that of the 965 grant recipients to date (1981-2016), 209 of them, or 21.7%, were foreign-born. [An-My Lê](#), who received a MacArthur grant in 2012, “fled Saigon as a teenager at the end of the Vietnam War. She graduated high school in Sacramento, went to college at Stanford and Yale, where she earned her graduate degrees, and drew acclaim for photography with war and military themes.” When asked about the prevalence of foreign-born grant winners, Lê said, “I think most of us feel very lucky to be here, so we work extremely hard...I think maybe trauma is part of what drives us.” From 2017 through 2023, approximately a third (34.3%) of all MacArthur winners have been first- or second-generation immigrants.²

¹ First-generation immigrants were born abroad to non-citizen parents and immigrated to the U.S. to live. Second-generation immigrants are U.S.-born individuals with at least one immigrant parent.

² Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration: recent data on MacArthur Fellows was collected by desk research, utilizing publicly available reports and documents.

Table 1: MacArthur Fellows

MacArthur Fellow (Year)	Total grants awarded	First-generation	Second-generation	Percentage of first- and second-generation
Total	166	33	24	34.3%
2023	20	3	3	30%
2022	25	4	6	40%
2021	25	4	2	24%
2020	21	3	1	19%
2019	26	6	3	34.6%
2018	25	4	7	44%
2017	24	9	2	45.8%

Source: Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2023

Three first-generation immigrants were awarded grants in 2023 including [E. Tendayi Achiume](#), a legal scholar born in Zambia, and [María Magdalena Campos-Pons](#), an artist born in Cuba. While at Atlantic College, an independent boarding school in Wales, Achiume became interested in international law.³ She went on to receive her bachelor's degree and Juris Doctor at Yale University. Through her work, Achiume "is reframing foundational concepts of international law at the intersection of racial justice and global migration."⁴ Campos-Pons grew up in a sugar plantation town in Cuba and "was raised among the first generation of Cuban children educated after the Cuban Revolution and benefited from Cuba's newly formed art education system," reported [ArtDaily](#). She received degrees from the National School of Art and the Higher Institute of Art in Havana, and went on to receive her MFA at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Campos-Pons "is the founder and director of the [Engine for Art, Democracy & Justice](#), an organization that connects institutions and artists from the U.S. South and the global South, and supports creative work that resists and repairs legacies of inequality."⁵

In 2022, six second-generation immigrants received MacArthur grants. One of those winners was [Monica Kim](#), a historian whose parents immigrated to the U.S. during the Korean War. Her interest in telling a different story of the Korean War was influenced by the absence of the Korean War from history books and her family's background. "Through a focus on perspectives beyond American state actors, Kim reorients our

³<https://dailybruin.com/2017/10/11/ucla-law-school-assistant-professor-appointed-to-un-human-rights-council>

⁴ <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2023/e-tendayi-achiume#searchresults>

⁵ <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2023/maria-magdalena-campos-pons#searchresults>

understanding of U.S. foreign policy during and after the Korean War [and] is expanding the perspectives from which we view American foreign policy—past, present, and future,” reports the MacArthur Foundation.

Nobel Prize Winners

The trend of foreign-born U.S. Nobel Prize winners remains strong. According to the [National Foundation for American Policy \(NFAP\)](#) as of 2023, “Immigrants have been awarded 40%, or 45 of 112, of the Nobel Prizes won by Americans in chemistry, medicine and physics since 2000.” In 2023, [Katalin Kariko](#),⁶ who came to the U.S. from Hungary as a postdoctoral scholar in 1985, won the Nobel Prize for medicine, overcoming numerous obstacles both in academia and immigration. In 2021, three immigrants won U.S. Nobel Prizes. “[David W.C. MacMillan](#), born in Scotland and a professor of chemistry at Princeton University, was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry. He came to the United States as an international student and earned a Ph.D. at the University of California-Irvine. [Syukuro Manabe](#), who immigrated to America from Japan to take a job at the U.S. Weather Bureau, received the 2021 Nobel Prize in physics. [Ardem Patapoutian](#), who immigrated to America at age 18 from war-torn Lebanon, received the 2021 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine, sharing the award with David Julius, born in the United States.”⁷ Their journeys to the U.S. are varied, which is the story of many immigrant-origin individuals living and thriving in the U.S.

Table 2: U.S. Nobel Prize Winners in Chemistry, Medicine and Physics: 2000-2023

U.S. Nobel Prize Winners in Chemistry, Medicine and Physics: 2000-2023			
Category	Immigrant	Native-Born	Percentage of Immigrant Winners
Physics	17	21	45%
Chemistry	16	23	41%
Medicine	12	23	34%
TOTAL	45	67	40%

Source: National Foundation for American Policy, Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, George Mason University Institute for Immigration Research

⁶ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/penn-demoted-her-then-she-won-the-nobel-prize>

⁷ Immigrants and Nobel Prizes: 1901-2023, NFAP, October 2023

University Campus Leaders

There are currently around 100 immigrant-origin presidents and chancellors at U.S. college and university campuses.⁸ [Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval](#), Ph.D. serves as the President of the California State University, Fresno (Fresno State). “Dr. Jiménez-Sandoval is an immigrant to the San Joaquin Valley, having arrived in the region from Mexico as a 10-year-old. He worked [on] his father’s small farm, and grew to appreciate the many cultures, languages and communities of the Valley,” reports [Fresno State](#).⁹ Other presidents who arrived in the U.S. as children or youth include [Pam Eddinger](#), Ph.D., President of Bunker Hill Community College; [Reginald DesRoches](#), Ph.D., President of Rice University; and [Farnam Jahanian](#), Ph.D., President of Carnegie Mellon University, to name a few. Dr. Eddinger, who also served as President of Moorpark College from 2008-2013, immigrated to the U.S. from Hong Kong at the age of 11.¹⁰ She has worked at community colleges for over 25 years, holding positions ranging from academics and student affairs, communications and policy, and executive leadership. Originally from Haiti, Dr. DesRoches arrived in the U.S. as a child in the late 1960s. At his inauguration, Dr. DesRoches shared about his parents’ sacrifices, having immigrated to the U.S. to provide their family with a better life. At Rice University, he also serves as a professor of civil and environmental engineering, and professor of mechanical engineering. Dr. DesRoches made history as the first Black, immigrant to lead Rice University.¹¹ Dr. Jahanian, a computer scientist and entrepreneur, arrived in Texas at the age of 16 to attend high school. After attending an all-boys Catholic high school, he remained in the U.S. and went on to receive undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Texas at Austin, respectively. (also see [role of foreign-born campus leaders and faculty](#).)

Several former international students are now leading campuses throughout the U.S. These leaders include [Raj Echambadi](#), Ph.D., President of Illinois Institute of Technology; [Javier Reyes](#), Ph.D., Chancellor of University of Massachusetts Amherst; and [Sonya Christian](#), Ph.D., Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, among others. Dr. Echambadi arrived in the U.S. from India as an international graduate student, and went on to receive his doctorate in marketing from the University of Houston. Dr. Reyes was born and raised in Mexico, and after completing his undergraduate studies at Tecnológico de Monterrey (Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey), he received his doctorate in economics at Texas A&M

⁸ Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration: data collected by desk research, utilizing publicly available reports and documents.

⁹ <https://www.wscuc.org/team/saul-jimenez-sandoval/>

¹⁰ <https://www.bhcc.edu/news/2013/april/bunker-hill-community-college-announces-new-president.html>

¹¹ <https://news.rice.edu/news/2022/rice-president-reginald-desroches-inaugurated-historic-investiture>

University. He is the first UMass Amherst chancellor of Hispanic origin. Dr. Christian, who previously served as the President at Bakersfield College and Chancellor at Kern Community College District, grew up in Kerala, India. She received her master's degree from the University of Southern California and her doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles.¹² [Marcelo Suárez-Orozco](#), Ph.D., Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Boston and distinguished scholar in education, globalization, and migration, arrived in the U.S. as a teenager after his parents bought a one-way ticket from Argentina to flee the terror and violence that the country was experiencing.¹³

(Also see the [recording of the Higher Ed Pathways to Immigration: Why it Matters](#) event held at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where Dr. Eddinger and Dr. Reyes share their American stories, and Dr. Suárez-Orozco, who moderated the conversation, briefly mentions his background.)

Immigrant Entrepreneurs








More broadly, immigrant-origin individuals continue to contribute greatly to the social and economic growth in the U.S. [Research](#) published by the American Immigration Council (AIC) “found that more than two out of every five Fortune 500 companies—the 500 largest corporations by revenue in the country—had at least one immigrant or child-of-immigrant founder.” In 2023, 44.8%, or 224, of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children and generated more than \$8 trillion in revenue. These ventures in turn open jobs and strengthen the U.S. economy, employing more than 14 million people. New York, California, Texas, Illinois, Florida, and Virginia have more than 10 Fortune 500 companies that were founded by at least one immigrant or a child and an immigrant. [AIC](#) maps the impact of immigrants in the U.S.

¹² <https://files.bakersfieldcollege.edu/archives/newsletters/2013-spring-v12-i1.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.massachusetts.edu/new-umass-boston-chancellor-marcelo-suarez-orozco>

Table 3: States with Over 10 New American Fortune 500 Companies

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 State	Number of New American Fortune 500 Companies	Combined Revenue (in Millions)	Employees (Worldwide)
 NY	30	\$1,043,201	1,915,982
 CA	24	\$1,289,066	1,165,770
 TX	22	\$844,975	983,405
 IL	19	\$567,330	1,094,402
 FL	14	\$219,365	364,421
 VA	13	\$377,040	1,008,300

Source: American Immigration Council, 2023

In 2022, the [NFAP](#) reported that “319 of 582, or 55%, of America’s startup companies valued at \$1 billion or more have at least one immigrant founder” and “at least 51 of the 582 U.S. billion-dollar startup companies have founders who were born in the United States to immigrant parents.” International students to the U.S. are among these founders and cofounders who contribute to the U.S. economy. “[Hari Balakrishnan](#), born in India, received a degree in computer science and engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras,” reported NFAP. He went on to receive his Ph.D. in computer science at the University of California, Berkeley and is currently a professor at MIT. Balakrishnan co-founded Cambridge Mobile Telematics, a leading mobile telematics provider.¹⁴ NFAP argues that immigration policies that are more open will contribute to more startup companies in the U.S. leading to more jobs being created for Americans.¹⁵

Table 4: U.S. Billion-Dollar Companies With Native-Born Founders With Immigrant Parents

U.S. Billion-Dollar Companies With Native-Born Founders With Immigrant Parents	
OpenSea	Cadence
Airtable	Aleo

¹⁴ Immigrant Entrepreneurs and U.S. Billion-Dollar Companies, NFAP, July 2022

¹⁵ Immigrant Entrepreneurs and U.S. Billion-Dollar Companies, NFAP, July 2022

Reddit	Glia
Scale AI	LayerZero Labs
Benchling	BetterUp
OneTrust	Injective Relief
Cerebral	Persona
GOAT	Timescale
Relativity	Gauntlet Networks
Scopely	Genies
Lucid Software	Human Interest
Grafana Labs	Komodo Health
Pendo	Loom
JumpCloud	Divvy Homes
Magic Leap	Coda
Aledade	Honor Technology
Collective Health	DailyPay
Cava Group	Mammoth Biosciences
AgentSync	Quantum Metric
Karat	Capsule
Vise	Forte Labs
Amperity	Amperity
Snorkel AI	Contrast Security
Shield AI	Coda
Assembly	Optimism
Guideline	

Source: National Foundation for American Policy, company sources, CB Insights

Conclusion: Immigration Trends and Policy Impacts

Immigrants are woven into the fabric of American history. The many accomplishments and achievements referenced here demonstrate the critical role that immigrant-origin individuals continue to play in America’s success. Their stories are examples of the diverse pathways to the U.S.

Their stories also reflect the significant impacts of immigration policy. As the NFAP report on Nobel Prize winners notes, the rise of foreign-born U.S. Nobel Prize winners “reflects an overall increase in the reputation and capability of American institutions and

researchers post-1960” and, in particular, the immigration policies that allowed the U.S. to become a leading destination for research, such as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which removed discriminatory national origin quotas, and the Immigration Act of 1990, which increased employment-based green card numbers.¹⁶

While these laws and other U.S. policies, have opened doors to those seeking to study in the U.S., pursue the “American Dream” or find refuge from conflict-torn countries, much work needs to be done to modernize our immigration system. This includes improving immigration and resettlement pathways for international and refugee students and providing routes to citizenship and permanent residency for those who have grown up in the U.S. who are undocumented or with precarious immigration statuses (for policy analysis and recommendations, see the [legislative](#) and [administrative](#) recommendations of the Presidents’ Alliance). At the Presidents’ Alliance, we celebrate the many accomplishments of immigrant-origin campus members and commit to advancing forward-looking policy change.

¹⁶ Immigrants and Nobel Prizes: 1901-2023, NFAP, October 2023