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Blog 4

Jaekyung Lee and Namsook Kim, “Aliens” on College Campuses: Immigrant and International Students’ Educational Opportunities and Challenges



Image from International Fiesta 2019 with the theme 'Human Nature.' The event is organized by the International Council of the UB Student Association and took place March 9, 2019 in the Center for the Arts, courtesy of [UB SmugMug](#).

Blog Authors: Jaekyung Lee, PhD, Graduate School of Education, and Namsook Kim, PhD, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, University at Buffalo

Introduction: We would like to start with a pop quiz. What is one of the common background characteristics of the following people (in categories 1 and 2 each)?

(1) Madeline Albright (Former US Secretary of State), Kamala Harris (US Senator, Vice President Candidate), Sergey Brin (Google Co-Founder)

(2) Kofi Annan (Former UN Secretary-General, Nobel Peace Laureate), Juan Manuel Santos (Former President of Columbia, Nobel Peace Laureate), Robin Yanhong Li (Baidu Co-Founder)

“Aliens” on College Campuses: Immigrant and International Students’ Educational Opportunities and Challenges

Blog Authors: [Jaekyung Lee, PhD](#), Graduate School of Education, and [Namsook Kim, PhD](#), Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, University at Buffalo

Keywords: Immigrants, International Students, International, Education, Diversity, Higher education, Anti-immigration policies, Xenophobia, Inequality, Education Policy, Culture and Society, Academic Freedom, Advocacy, Covid-19, Immigration Policy, Visa, International, Resources

Quiz: We would like to start with a pop-up quiz. What is one of the common background characteristics of the following people (in categories 1 and 2 each)?

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Answers: (1) immigrant background (they have foreign-born parents) and (2) international student (they studied in an American university) background.

This example illustrates the power of both immigrant and international student groups who have potential—and an actual but unsung history—to make great contributions to the nation and the world. Both populations, who the US government labels and treats as “aliens” regardless of individual diversity, steadily increased their presence in the US over the past few decades, until the current government’s anti-immigration policy (e.g., ban on temporary work visas) and regulations on the entry of international students gave a blow to their demographic trends. Although many colleges and universities in the U.S. make efforts to become more diverse and inclusive, they fall short of meeting the need of immigrant and international students who have been often marginalized and alienated on college campuses.

Our research project, supported by the AccessLex Institute, the Association for Institutional Research and the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy, addresses those issues to provide new insights into the challenges and opportunities of immigrant and international students in 4-year colleges and universities. This work is based on transformative higher education and asset models, thus challenging conventional deficit views. Immigrant and international students, having achieved so much with relatively fewer resources and more barriers, can provide a national “model of strength” worth studying and emulating. Using the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study’s nationally representative sample of 4-year college/university student data as well as interview case studies from a purposively sampled site, the study examined undergraduate students’ learning gaps in terms of their college degree attainment and transition to career and graduate/professional education.

First, we found mixed patterns of learning gaps among different immigrant and international student groups. The first-generation immigrant students showed disadvantages in terms of both educational and career attainment, whereas the second-generation immigrant students performed as well as the U.S. natives (third-generation and later). International students had both advantages and disadvantages as they excelled in college degree attainment and graduate/professional school enrollment but trailed in

full-time job employment (at least in the U.S.). One common pattern among immigrant and international groups was that they are overrepresented in STEM fields and underrepresented in humanities and human service fields including education, social work, and law. This bias toward STEM fields may reflect cultural and language barriers that the students may internalize through the societal and educational systems. It is necessary to give them career advising and graduate/professional school mentoring that start early and continue throughout their higher education journeys.

Second, we found that not only academic but also sociocultural collegiate experiences, for example, study abroad, co-op/internship, student teaching, research project, and leadership/volunteer work are the key predictors of college students' persistence and degree completion as well as later career or graduate/professional education success. Specifically, we found that engagement in four or more such *high-impact practices* (HIPs) would help reach 70% chance of college success. The key to success was not a single impactful practice but the synergy of accumulation of student engagement in intersecting quality HIPs, leading to "turning points" and positive college outcomes. It is critical to re-engage marginalized or alienated groups of immigrant and international students in more integrated learning experiences including experiential and sociocultural learning opportunities, not just academic coursework required for their different college degrees. Intentional, committed action at the institutional level is vital to students' transformative agency development and college success.

Lastly but not the least importantly, recent anti-immigration policies as well as xenophobia against certain ethnic groups during pandemic crisis have positioned immigrant and international students in unprecedented, societal environments where they feel unsafe, alienated, discriminated, and not valued as contributors to the society's sociocultural, economic, and academic prosperity, when they are assets, indeed. The "Buy American, Hire American" policy does not help but hurts America by losing the exceptional pool of immigrant and international students whose diverse talents are needed in the national and global economy. It is our responsibility to raise awareness, educate ourselves and others, advocate for our societal assets, and construct new realities with action. Let's work together to keep *American Dream* viable and inclusive of everyone who deserves it.