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Educating Immigrants and Native Minorities in CUNY Community Colleges

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New York City has always attracted a significant share of the foreign-born newcomers to the United States, but during the last two decades the growth of the city's immigrant population has accelerated. In 1990, according to the U.S. Census, 28.2 percent of New York City's population was foreign born. By 1999, 42 percent of the city's population was born abroad.

Many immigrants arrive with skills, but many others pick up their advanced skills in New York, particularly at the schools of the City University of New York (CUNY). CUNY serves both young immigrants whose parents brought them to New York and older immigrants whose motivation to educate themselves is driven by the economic goals that likely also motivated their immigration. This Brief examines the experience of immigrants and native minorities in CUNY during the 1990s. How much education do immigrants who enroll in CUNY actually acquire, and do they earn degrees? In short, how would we evaluate CUNY's success in providing an educational foundation for recent arrivals?

We focus on immigrant enrollment in community colleges and two-year associate degree programs in the senior colleges. Community colleges are designed to facilitate access to higher education for all groups, including individuals with weak academic skills, low incomes, and other characteristics that create barriers to further education. One of the goals of the study on which this Brief is based was to determine whether the two-year programs play this type of role in CUNY.

IMMIGRANT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

CUNY analysts have conducted research on the experience of immigrants in the University (CUNY, 1995). Their report pointed out that more

than one-third of the first-time CUNY freshmen in 1990 were born abroad and predicted that by the year 2000 the foreign born would account for almost one-half of the starting freshmen.

This Brief builds on the CUNY study in two broad ways. First, we focus particularly on the two-year colleges. Although the CUNY research provides some comparisons between students in two- and four-year programs, we carry out a more detailed analysis of the determinants of enrollment in the two types of programs, and add a consideration of native minorities, something not done by the CUNY researchers. Second, the CUNY report does not analyze educational outcomes. Access to postsecondary education is certainly an important issue, but what students do with that access—that is, how much education they actually accumulate—is also important.

As immigration has accelerated in the last decade, community colleges appear to be well-suited to provide access to higher education for newcomers to the U.S. Thus we would expect immigrants, especially recent immigrants, to be particularly concentrated in the two-year institutions.

Some educators advocate eliminating remediation from the senior colleges and confining such efforts to the two-year programs. They argue that such a policy would raise standards at the senior institutions and strengthen educational benefits for students who are already prepared to do college-level work (MacDonald, 1994; Schmidt, et al., 1999). Critics of this policy fear that it would restrict opportunities for immigrants and minorities ("An Assault," 1998). According to their perspective, restricting access to the senior colleges is a serious impediment to mobility because a bachelor's degree is considered the key to economic opportunity, and enrollment in a community college lowers the probability of earning a BA (Dougherty, 1994; Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996).

The large majority of traditional-aged college students, including those in community colleges, state that they would like to earn at least a bachelor's degree, yet students in two-year programs are much less likely to complete a BA than those in four-year programs (Dougherty,

1994). Alternatively, Rouse (1995) found that although community colleges lowered the educational attainment of students seeking bachelor's degrees, they provided access to higher education for students who probably would not have enrolled in a four-year school.

At root, the issue is about how open four-year schools should be to students who might be expected either to have difficulty succeeding in higher education or to avoid it altogether. Regardless of the merits of the recommendation to confine remediation to two-year programs, it is important to understand whether immigrants are currently concentrated in the two- or the four-year programs and the extent to which they use the two-year programs successfully to accumulate credits and earn degrees.

THE CUNY IMMIGRANT POPULATION

CUNY's Office of Institutional Research and Analysis (OIRA) maintains data files, updated annually, for every fall semester cohort of first-time freshmen entering the University. The paper from which this Brief is distilled is primarily built around an analysis of the Fall 1990 cohort. In 1990, just over 33 percent of CUNY's entering students were born abroad. By 1997, 48 percent of the entering class were born abroad. Thus, in seven years, the foreign-born share of the entering cohort rose by 45 percent.

Allocation of Students in Two- and Four-Year Programs

Given the community college role in providing access to a broad range of students, we expected to find immigrant students to be more concentrated in the CUNY two-year than in the four-year institutions. Surprisingly, this was not the case. The immigrant shares of the enrollments in the two types of colleges were very close. But we did find differences when we disaggregated the immigrant student population. The large majority (82 percent) of foreign-born students at CUNY attended secondary school in the U.S. Immigrants who attended high school abroad were slightly overrepresented in the two-year programs while the group that attended high school in the U.S. was slightly underrepresented.

The foreign born are not a homogeneous group. Although, overall, immigrants were not particularly concentrated in the two-year programs, some immigrant groups do in fact rely more on the two-year than on the four-year programs. Asians are more likely to enroll in the four-year programs

while immigrants from the Western Hemisphere are more concentrated in the community colleges. So, for some groups the two-year programs represent an important point of access to the CUNY system.

Racial and ethnic differences appear to be just as important as differences in nativity in determining enrollments in two- or four-year programs. Both native- and foreign-born whites and Asians are overrepresented in the four-year programs, while both U.S.-born and immigrant African Americans and Hispanics are concentrated in the community colleges and two-year programs.

These simple comparisons suggest that foreign-born students who attended high school abroad, African American students (both immigrant and native), and Hispanic students (both immigrant and native) were overrepresented in two-year institutions.

To explore these outcomes further we carried out a multivariate analysis of the determinants of enrollment in the two types of schools. In addition to the nativity, racial, and ethnic variables, we also included scores on assessment tests, age, gender, socioeconomic background, parenthood, and employment while enrolled. This more complete analysis still shows that foreign-born students who graduated from a U.S. high school are more likely to enroll in a four-year program.

Individuals who earned a GED, older students, those with jobs, and those with childcare responsibilities were all more likely to enroll in a community college even after controlling for all of the other included variables. Women and students who stated that they wanted a BA were more likely to enroll in a four-year program.

African Americans were much more likely than whites to enroll in a two-year program. But surprisingly, there were no statistically significant effect for Hispanics or Asians. This suggests that the Hispanic concentration in community colleges was a result of their low test scores, rather than some particular "Hispanic" effect. Similarly, the Asian overrepresentation in four-year programs can be explained by the characteristics of the Asian students without resorting to an "Asian culture" argument.

Therefore, to some extent, CUNY's community colleges are playing their expected role of providing access to higher education for the city's immigrant population, especially immigrants who attended high school abroad. But since the four-year schools also play that role—although somewhat less frequently for the foreign born who took their secondary education abroad—it makes sense to think of CUNY as a whole as an extremely important immigrant-educating institution. While

we have identified some differences in the enrollment of immigrants in the two- and four-year programs, these differences are probably less important than CUNY's *overall* role.

Educational Outcomes for Two-Year Entrants

How well are immigrants able to use the CUNY colleges to achieve their educational goals?

After eight years, only 23 percent of the students who started in a two-year program have earned an associate degree. Certainly a 23 percent graduation rate for a high school would be considered disastrously low. But many community college students transfer to a four-year institution without earning an associate degree, and such students should not be seen as dropouts. Indeed, most community college personnel would see a successful transfer, even without a degree, as a successful educational outcome. Moreover, many community college students are looking for specific skills that can be learned in a set of specific courses and these students may have no intention of or need to complete a degree. Low completion or even low transfer rates may be reflections of the diversity of roles played by these institutions rather than an indication of institutional failure.

Because of the ambiguity about the nature of a successful community college experience, several different outcome variables were analyzed: the number of degree credits earned, associate degrees earned, and transfers to four-year programs or institutions. In addition, students who transferred to a BA program were looked at in order to determine the characteristics that promote successful completion of that degree.

Foreign-born students earned significantly more credits than the native born. On all of the measures, the foreign-born graduates of foreign high schools were the most successful, while the native born were the least successful. The experience of the foreign born with U.S. high school diplomas lay in the middle. The most dramatic difference among these three groups was in the rate of associate degree attainment, not in the transfer rate. On the other hand, of those who did transfer—that is, those who subsequently enrolled in a bachelor's degree program—42 percent of the foreign born who attended a foreign high school actually earned a BA degree, while only 35 percent of the native born earned that degree.

One interpretation of these results is that immigrants who graduate from high school abroad arrive with a reasonably strong underlying level of education, but with language deficiencies. These immigrants have relatively high scores on the math

assessment test. They then use the community college to strengthen their language skills. Once that is achieved, they are able to accumulate credits and are more likely to earn degrees. This pattern suggests that many of these immigrants did not come from the poorest social classes in the sending countries. The two-year programs allow them to overcome one particular weakness in their preparation. Natives who have a similar type of education may be more likely to start directly in a four-year program.

On the other hand, the data still show a low rate of degree completion. Even though over three-quarters of the students who enter the two-year program state that they aspire to earning at least a BA, eight years after enrolling, only one-fifth have enrolled in a bachelor's program. Although the foreign born in general do have more educational achievement, their chances of transfer are not much higher than those for natives.

Are these results the direct influence of some factors associated in particular with nativity, or are they the result of the characteristics that the immigrants happened to have? The results of the multivariate analysis indicate that immigrants who attended high school abroad accumulate more credits and are more likely to complete an associate degree than natives. They are *not* more likely to transfer, and if they do transfer, they are not more likely to earn a BA than natives. But immigrants who graduated from high school in the U.S. earn more credits and are more likely to complete an associate degree, or to transfer, than natives.

Race and ethnicity appear to have little effect on these measures of educational success. Hispanics do earn fewer credits and African Americans are slightly less likely to transfer, but these variables do not influence the probability of their completing an associate degree. The most significant finding is that African Americans and Hispanics who transfer have a lower probability than whites of earning a BA.

Enrolling in a school that combines two- and four-year programs (hybrid colleges) increases the probability of transfer, but it actually decreases the probability of completing an associate degree. Moreover, once a student at a hybrid college has transferred to a four-year program, he or she does have a higher probability of earning a BA.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IMMIGRANT AND NATIVE ENROLLMENTS AT CUNY

There is nothing in our analysis of the patterns of enrollments in the two- and four-year schools to suggest the development of any conflict or

competition between immigrant and native students. Since CUNY's overall enrollments are considerably lower than they were in the mid-1970s (prior to the implementation of tuition), the university clearly has the capacity to expand if students present themselves.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most striking conclusion is that the immigrant enrollment at CUNY has grown so rapidly. Certainly, enrollments at CUNY reflect the immigrant character of the city's population. In fact, the foreign born are actually overrepresented among the university's students relative to their share of the population. The foreign-born share of CUNY enrollments grew from 33 percent in 1990 to 48 percent in 1997. Thus, in under a decade, the university has undergone a profound change in the nature of its student body.

As a group, immigrants are not more likely to enroll in a community than a four-year college. Although those immigrants who graduated from a foreign high school do tend to be more concentrated in the two-year programs. Among all students who start at a CUNY community college, immigrants accumulate more credits than natives and are more likely to earn an associate degree. Those immigrants who attended high school in the U.S. are more likely than natives to transfer to a four-year program.

High levels of immigrant enrollments are not new at CUNY, but the rapid growth of those enrollments during the last decade is unprecedented. This increase in the number of foreign-born students has undoubtedly increased enrollments in the university as a whole, and should therefore probably be seen as a positive development. The trend will create more pressure on services designed to strengthen language skills and provide developmental education. But this service is increasingly a core activity of urban public

universities, and community colleges in particular.

One trend that deserves more attention is the continued and, we predict, growing concentration of native African Americans and Hispanics in the two-year programs. We would like to know more about why these groups continue to be overrepresented in the two-year programs, even after controlling for test scores and other demographic characteristics. It is important that the effort needed to adjust to the rapid increase in the immigrant enrollments not divert attention from the continued educational problems faced by many native groups.☞

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