

## *Understanding College Students of Immigrant Origin*

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If you met Olivia and Seo-Joon, it would be easy to observe their differences.<sup>1</sup> Seo-Joon described himself as Asian, gay, Christian, an engineering major, and “a non-traditional learner”; Olivia identified as Black, vegan, socialist, an international affairs major, and “a type-A student.” If you listened to their stories, you would hear about different journeys to and through higher education. For instance, you might notice their unique paths to enrolling in college. Seo-Joon came from a low-income, working-class family, where he was part of the first generation to attend a 4-year college or university. He chose to pursue higher education because he hoped it would be a “pathway to success” and upward mobility. Meanwhile, Olivia, who grew up in an upper-middle-class family with two college-educated parents, had always assumed she would go to college. She explained, “I always knew I was going to do my bachelor’s and probably a master’s too.”

Important differences were likewise evident in their experiences within college, especially in the ways they approached involvement on campus. Olivia became part of the honors program in her major; she joined a political organization, Model United Nations, and the vegan society; and she began conducting research with a faculty mentor. Her schedule was busy, to say the least. By contrast, Seo-Joon’s only involvement on campus was his employment as a peer learning assistant. He was wary of becoming overextended.

It was even possible to anticipate different college outcomes foreshadowed by their trajectories toward future careers. Seo-Joon had accumulated various information technology certifications that he hoped would help him land a job at an engineering firm. He laid careful plans for the future. Olivia, on the other hand, described her career goals as “flexible,” noting that “I feel very comfortable in the position that I’m in right now,

<sup>1</sup> Olivia and Seo-Joon were interviewed as part of a broader project on students’ college journeys. Both names are pseudonyms.

but I don't really think about further goals." As she looked toward the future, career planning felt less urgent.

With so many differences, it would be easy to lose track of what Olivia and Seo-Joon had in common: They were both students of immigrant origin. Seo-Joon's family emigrated from South Korea when he was 2 years old, and Olivia's parents left France when she was four. They were both part of the first generation in their families to grow up in the United States, and they each described this dimension of their identities as central in shaping their college journeys. They discussed the ways being of immigrant origin affected their experiences on campus, and both noted that their family's immigration history was a source of inspiration. For instance, Seo-Joon shared the following:

I think being from an immigrant family, being a second generation, it's very much I have to do really well because my parents sacrificed everything to come here; I have expectations set. But I want to take the expectations, really run with it. I want to blow them away and eventually be able to repay them for everything that they've given for me. And that's one of my driving factors. I want to give back as much as they've been invested in me and return it to them.

Despite this important commonality in their lived experiences, if we encountered Olivia and Seo-Joon's stories in the higher education literature, they might often be in separate veins of research. For instance, we might find Seo-Joon's story in a book on first-generation college students or LGBTQ+ identity development, only to find Olivia's journey featured in a separate volume on Black students or political identity development. Exploring these aspects of their lived experiences could unearth important insights about the ways race, generational status, sexual orientation, and political identity inform students' experiences and outcomes in higher education. Yet, it would also leave uninterrogated their shared experiences as students from immigrant families, a pattern of neglect that is widespread in the higher education literature. Put simply, the vast majority of research fails to account for the ways in which immigrant origins inform the college journeys of students like Olivia and Seo-Joon.

Moreover, widely used handbooks for student affairs practice and student development theory ignore the experiences of these students. Thus, few administrators or student affairs practitioners are exposed to knowledge about college students of immigrant origin. And, perhaps unsurprisingly then, very few campus offices, personnel, or services are equipped to support these students. With limited insights about their experiences, it has proven difficult for higher education leaders to design policies,

practices, and resources capable of meeting their needs. This volume – *Supporting College Students of Immigrant Origin* – works to change course, centering the experiences of this student population in order to spark new conversations about how to foster student inclusion, support, and success.

We offer this work now because, despite their growing representation within colleges and universities in the United States, students of immigrant origin are still largely neglected in conversations about research, policy, and practice in higher education. Fortunately, in recent years, scholars and practitioners have opened new lines of inquiry, illuminating aspects of the unique postsecondary experiences of this student population. This work, spread across a diverse range of disciplines and conversations, has yet to be brought together in ways that allow us to understand the broader college journeys of immigrant-origin youth. That is the challenge taken up by this volume. We bring together a set of twenty chapters, written by over fifty authors, to examine how students of immigrant origin experience the road to, through, and beyond higher education, while, simultaneously, speaking to evidence-based implications for policy, research, and practice.

### **Social, Historical, and Political Contexts of US Immigration**

Scholars have characterized changes in twentieth-century immigration policies as “one of the most dramatic shifts in the history of the United States” (King, 2002, p. 1). Following an early period of comparative flexibility, the rules governing immigration became highly restrictive in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, prevented Chinese emigrants from coming to the United States, and the Immigration Act of 1924 introduced a set of national origin-based quotas and fully excluded migrants from most of Asia (Lee, 2015; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Sáenz & Manges Douglas, 2015). These policies and others not only limited migration, but they also created a coercive pressure toward assimilation for those who came to live in the United States, narrowing understandings of what it meant to be a US citizen (King, 2002). While many of these restrictive policies were later reversed or revised, the history and present realities of exclusive immigration laws remain visible (Delgado, 2022).

These trends were apparent in understandings of how immigration was supposed to occur that were dominant through much of the twentieth century. As Song and Cabral noted in their foreword to this volume, the metaphor of a “melting pot” has long been used to convey beliefs that immigrants should assimilate to a mainstream “American” culture that was assumed to be the culture of White, middle-class, protestant Christian citizens. Sociological

theories of assimilation evolved from this notion to describe a normative process by which immigrants moved from initial contact to assimilation (Alba & Nee, 1997; Kivisto, 2015; Waters & Jiménez, 2005). Though numerous studies have illuminated the limitations of this metaphor, and the ways it obscures much of the complexity of immigrant experiences, the idea of a “melting pot” continues to be invoked by politicians and policymakers.

Historians describe immigration to the United States as occurring in distinctive periods that correspond with these changes to policy. Following the highly restrictive policies of the early- to mid-twentieth century, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act brought an end to country-of-origin quotas. Immigrants from a much broader array of countries, including those from Asia and Central and South America arrived in the United States (Portes et al., 2005). This “third wave” of immigration corresponded with new ways of thinking about what the United States represented, with pluralism and multiculturalism offering visions that competed with demands for assimilation (Kivisto, 2002).

In contrast to the notion of a melting pot, proponents of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism recognize that immigrants to the United States simultaneously hold multiple – sometimes coequal, sometimes competing – sources of identity (King, 2002). Canonical theories of migration suggest that individuals begin to accommodate – and eventually assimilate to – the culture of their destination. Scholars studying pluralism and multiculturalism have demonstrated that these identities persist over time such that immigrants to the United States, for instance, continue to affiliate with a salient ethnic identity while also building a sense of identification as “Americans” (Kivisto, 2002). Such possibilities are likewise apparent in scholarship on transnationalism, which acknowledges the ways many individuals experience membership in a place of origin and an immigrant destination simultaneously (Portes et al., 1999; Waldinger, 2013).

Notably, the shift from primarily European immigrants to immigrants from Asia and Latin America occurred alongside important changes in the US economy. Twentieth-century deindustrialization led to the rise of a service-based economy that limited pathways toward upward mobility. Where prior generations of immigrants benefitted from what some have described as an “escalator economy” with opportunities for incremental improvement in one’s socioeconomic circumstances, today’s “hour-glass economy” commonly requires a more substantial leap to move from entry-level manual and service jobs to middle-class occupations requiring advanced education (Massey & Hirst, 1998; Portes et al., 2009). The result is that intergenerational upward mobility for immigrants from

working-class families often requires a college degree, as does social reproduction for immigrants from more socioeconomically advantaged families.

### *Intersectional Perspectives on College Students of Immigrant Origin*

Over recent years, efforts to understand and support social mobility through college access and degree attainment have been influential in incubating an emerging literature on college students of immigrant origin. Over 5 million college students in the United States – nearly one-in-three students currently enrolled – are of immigrant origin (i.e., children of immigrant parents/guardians and/or immigrants themselves). Notably, these students accounted for almost 60 percent of the growth in higher education enrollment in the twenty-first century (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education, 2021).

Studies show that students of immigrant origin and their families frequently have plans for college attendance in pursuit of bachelor's and graduate degrees (Kim, 2013; Lu, 2013; Raleigh & Kao, 2010). Encouragement from family members and a sense of family pride sustains these motivations over time (George Mwangi et al., 2020). Yet despite high aspirations, these students confront obstacles to educational achievement, including racism (Sánchez-Connally, 2018), anti-immigrant sentiment (Sherkat & Lehman, 2018), and other prejudiced assumptions about their abilities (Lopez, 2003; Richards, 2017). Even in higher education scholarship, depictions of immigrant students are often negative and deficit-based, portraying these students as lacking college-relevant knowledge and skills (see also George Mwangi et al., 2021). Though students of immigrant-origin frequently demonstrate resilience and garner recognition for outstanding achievement in myriad fields (Nazar et al., 2019; Sánchez-Connally, 2018), these forms of marginalization can undermine their access to educational opportunities (Haller et al., 2011; Portes et al., 2005).

Understanding the ways agency and constraint come together to influence the educational trajectories of students from immigrant families has helped scholars and the higher education community to begin envisioning structures, policies, and practices that could better foster student inclusion, support, and success. These advances stem from scholarship that complicates assumptions about the normative student experience by raising questions about whether and how the histories and present realities of immigration are factored into these conversations. But as such advances occur, it is important to be wary of replacing one homogenizing narrative

with another. Rather than assuming that all students from immigrant families experience and navigate college in the same ways, scholars must be cognizant of the complex ways immigrant identities are mutually constituted by other dimensions of lived experience.

How exactly can we expand understandings of the complex experiences of contemporary college students of immigrant origin? The chapters in this volume will illustrate numerous valuable approaches. One commonality, shared by many of them, is the use – implicit or explicit – of an intersectional lens. Drawing from insights about the ways race, class, and gender intertwined in the US legal system, shaping experiences with antidiscrimination law, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced the notion of intersectionality. In doing so, she argued that the ways individuals experience aspects of the social world can best be understood not by treating these dimensions of lived experience as separate, but rather by considering the unique ways they intersect with one another.

Situating this lens within a broader tradition of Black feminist claims, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argued that recognition of these realities requires grappling with questions of power that speak to the ways experiences of oppression are informed by one's intersectional social location. Developing her notion of a "matrix of domination," Collins observed that when we acknowledge the role of power in organizing these dynamics, it becomes possible to recognize the limits of traditional conceptions of multiculturalism, which have historically celebrated a plurality of "different" views and experiences without acknowledging that "different" in most cases also means unequal.

In their volume *Intersectionality and Higher Education*, Byrd and colleagues (2019) write that intersectional approaches to research provide "a useful framework to discuss how mobility and marginalization exist on our college campuses" (p. 5). Importantly though, there are many ways to employ an intersectional lens to guide research. McCall (2005) outlined three approaches, defined in relation to how they treat categories of experience (e.g., race, gender, class, language, citizenship, sexual orientation, ability). Some scholars rely on *intercategorical* comparisons to explore inequality between groups defined in relation to different identities, while others use *intracategorical* analyses to examine frequently neglected social groups at the intersections of specific categories of experience. Meanwhile, there are also those scholars who take an *anti-categorical* approach that works to complicate fixed categories.

This work – *Supporting College Students of Immigrant Origin* – illustrates the diversity of these intersectional approaches. We include studies

that think across intersectional categories, like Ho's chapter, which compares the college enrollment processes of immigrant-origin and US-born students across levels of parental education. Similarly, we feature numerous chapters that focus on specific intersectional social groups that have been previously neglected in research on higher education, such as Núñez-Pacheco and Martin's chapter on first-generation, working-class Latinx students of immigrant-origin and Aziz's chapter on second-generation Afghan immigrants. Finally, there are chapters that ask readers to question and complicate what we think we know about the category of "immigrant." Suresh and colleagues' chapter on international students, for example, takes this approach.

### **An Overview of the Volume**

Equipped with a range of approaches to examining the experiences and needs of diverse groups of immigrant-origin college students, the chapters in this volume push research in new and exciting directions. Collectively, they speak to the broad academic trajectories that these students take to and through higher education. In doing so, the scholarship featured in this book provides, for the first time, a high-level view of the college pathways students of immigrant origin traverse today.

The volume is organized in four parts, which trace students' journeys as they relate to higher education. Following this chapter, Part I, "Beginnings," includes four chapters that delve into the precollege and high school-to-college transition experiences of immigrant-origin students. First, in Chapter 2, Ho uses data from the National Center for Education Statistics to explore variation by parental education level in college enrollment processes for immigrant-origin students and students with US-born parents. Next, Gast and colleagues give readers a glimpse of the complex school and family resource-related challenges multilingual high-school mentors from immigrant families navigate to support the college applications of their mentees. In her chapter on higher education decision-making, Luqueño shows how conceptualizations of the future shape immigrant-origin students' thinking about whether and where they might attend college. In Chapter 5, García-Fragoso and Alemán examine interviews with first-year students to challenge assumptions about college preparedness for students of immigrant origin, showing how universities could work to foster more inclusive mentorship experiences.

In Part II, "Experiences," six chapters are featured with in-depth accounts of how students' intersectional identities shape their experiences on campus.

In the first chapter of this section, Alleman and colleagues examine how students rely on funds of knowledge, including attitudes and skills learned from their immigrant families, to navigate issues of food insecurity at affluent universities. Then, with the help of twenty-one semi-structured interviews with racially and ethnically minoritized undocumented students, Torres Stone and colleagues document the daily stressors and related coping strategies that affect these students' college experiences. Next, by analyzing in-depth interviews with full-time students who work 20 hours a week or more, Free and Križ expose the ways working college students of immigrant origin confront a time deficit that impacts their academic experiences and well-being. In Chapter 9, Pagliarulo McCarron and colleagues center first-generation college student women of immigrant origin and explore how these women perceived the role of gender and multiple life responsibilities with respect to their experiences on- and off-campus. Next, in exploring the experiences of second-generation Afghan immigrants, Aziz shows how factors like family involvement, community belonging, and ethnic student organization participation inform students' approaches to navigating ethnic and racial identity in higher education. Finally, Ponjuán and colleagues' chapter explores how the higher education experiences of Latino/x college men have been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following these explorations of how students arrive to and experience higher education, Part III of the volume, "Arrangements," considers the specific institutional arrangements that inform the journeys and outcomes of immigrant-origin college students. Núñez-Pacheco and Martin begin this section by drawing from research and theory to explain how higher education leaders including advisors, data analysts, and other college administrators can foster success for working-class Latinx students of immigrant origin. In Chapter 13, Sommers and colleagues present a case for the use of appreciative advising to support college students of immigrant origin by building relationships that foster a sense of belonging. Next, Hutchinson and colleagues analyze the institutional forces impacting Black immigrant experiences on US campuses in the context of histories of colonialism and marginalization. In their chapter, Kalamkarian and colleagues combine survey and interview data to conduct a social network analysis in order to illuminate the relationships and support systems of Latinx first-generation college students. In Chapter 16, Suresh and colleagues use a transnational perspective that accounts for the dynamic ways individuals experience crossing national borders in order to analyze the avenues by which postsecondary institutions support international students' well-being and belonging.



Finally, Part IV of the volume, “Looking Forward,” presents four chapters and an epilogue that draw connections between students’ college experiences, the process of leaving higher education, students’ imagined futures, and the perspectives of educators who work to support them. Starting off this final portion of the volume, Leo uses theories of cultural capital to examine how students of immigrant origin, including refugees, confront challenges in college that inform and, sometimes, constrain their aspirations for the future. Next, Jach and colleagues employ an ecological systems framework to synthesize recent research on how college personnel can support Latinx undocumented students on their journeys to, through, and beyond higher education. Then, Muruato and Coleman employ findings that emerged from a unique dataset of interviews with undocumented students who left higher education to explain how college departures are the result of failures in institutional support. In Chapter 20, Leao and Quaye build from their experiences as immigrants from India and Ghana, respectively, to explore both challenges and possibilities from the perspective of immigrant educators in order to spark reflection on what readers can do to support immigrant students on their campuses. The volume then concludes with an epilogue offered by Frye and Cheuk, who tie together the themes presented in this volume as they consider a case of resistance and rebellion found in a student organization for aspiring educators of immigrant origin.

### **How to Approach This Volume**

This volume is the first of which we are aware to explore the broad experiences of college students of immigrant origin across the higher education landscape of the contemporary United States, and we are excited for the opportunity to share the impressive work from our contributors. But we also want to acknowledge the limits of this volume. Readers who pick up this book hoping for a comprehensive account of the experiences of *all* immigrant-origin students will inevitably be disappointed. As each of the authors of this volume make clear in their own ways, such an endeavor would be impossible. Contemporary college students are incredibly diverse. Their journeys to and through higher education are incredibly diverse. Postsecondary institutions are incredibly diverse. Faculty, staff, and administrators are incredibly diverse, as are the strategies they employ to support success for students of immigrant origin.

How, then, should readers approach this volume? We suggest using it as a place to begin and expand conversations. Collectively, the four parts that

follow bring together innovative and emerging scholarly literature about the unique experiences of students of immigrant origin in higher education. We also aim to spark dialogue about the institutional changes that could help colleges and universities foster success for these students. We hope policymakers, practitioners, faculty, and other administrators will find insights to inform their work. Similarly, we hope students will discover resources to support their advocacy and activism involving college students of immigrant origin. And we hope scholars will learn about the most recent developments in this area of study.

In addition to illuminating and expanding what we know about the experiences of college students of immigrant origin and how to support these student populations, the chapters in this volume point to important areas for further research. As such, they offer a springboard to new inquiry. For instance, multiple chapters point to the possibility of further research on the ways students of immigrant origin engage in advocacy and activism to change their campuses and associated processes that play crucial roles in shaping students' socioemotional experiences of higher education (Binder & Kidder, 2022; McCarron et al., 2023). Likewise, there are several chapters that point to the need to better understand how parents can be included in students' higher education journeys, a topic that has often been neglected due to normative beliefs about how college students develop independence (Hamilton et al., 2018; Kiyama & Harper, 2018).

The gaps in this volume point to additional possibilities for further inquiry. For instance, there is an urgent need for research exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of immigrant origin. Additionally, while our volume covers a broad range of postsecondary institutions, these chapters focus on students enrolled in nonprofit higher education. Scholars should consider how future studies could go further to account for the journeys of students of immigrant origin who enroll in for-profit institutions, settings that scholars argue play a role in the perpetuation of racial and ethnic inequality (McMillan Cottom, 2017). Finally, while research on the senior-year transition of immigrant-origin college students has expanded in recent years (Kalaivanan et al., 2022; Silver et al., 2022), we still know little about the postcollege journeys of these students after they graduate. By identifying opportunities like these, students, scholars, and higher education leaders can chart paths forward for the expansion of knowledge directed toward understanding and supporting college students of immigrant origin.

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