



## ***Encounters between Immigrant Students and U.S. Urban Universities***

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**Abstract:** The intention of this article is to gain an in depth understanding of immigrants' experiences and their encounters with institutions of higher education, focusing on the nature of academic barriers and students' coping strategies in response to them. The situation of undocumented students, both in and out of universities, will receive special attention. Findings are based on a 2006 survey of a convenience sample of 149 students, both immigrant and non-immigrant, at two universities in Boston, Massachusetts, one public and one private. The sample included 106 females and 43 males; 27 students classified themselves as racial minorities. All but seven of the students were between the ages of 18 and 24. Eleven questions, some closed and some open ended, probed their experiences as, or with, immigrant students in the college classroom, especially the issue of immigrant students' inclusion and sense of belonging in the universities in question. In addition, the author interviewed five professors located at both universities to probe their understanding of immigrant students, and effective ways of teaching them at their institutions. The conclusions offer several recommendations for how university professors can become more accommodating and welcoming to immigrant students, and how they might improve their success in university study. Lastly, the author relies in the explanations on some of her own experiences as a first-generation Brazilian immigrant who has earned bachelors and masters degrees in the United States and is currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Sociology at Boston University.

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### **I. U.S. IMMIGRATION, NATIONALLY AND REGIONALLY**

A record number of very diverse immigrant groups have recently settled in the United States. Between 2000 and 2007 alone, the number of foreign-born Ameri-

cans increased almost seven million, to a total of 38,048,456 foreign born, or 12.6% of the overall population (Pew Hispanic Center 2007). The New England immigrant profile is different from the nation as a whole, fast growing and with an even more diverse range of national groupings than usual. The largest shares are from Latin

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America, Asia, and Europe, each with a quarter or more. Europeans at 29% are more than twice as numerous as nationally, while Mexicans are only 2% as compared with 30% nationally. No single grouping is more than 6% of the total immigrant population. Of Latin Americans, Brazilians are the single largest national grouping (Owens 2009).

Immigrants in New England, as well as nationally, arrive in pursuit of a better life for themselves and their children. Whether immigrants are documented or not, they share an equal commitment to furthering their education. Understanding that it is an important tool for their longer-term economic success, they seek access to formal education at all levels for themselves (Gray 1996; Ogbu 1993). Of course, the undocumented students face special educational barriers. Because of recent Homeland Security restrictions, many enter the country without legal permission, reportedly more than one quarter of all immigrants according to a recent report from the Urban Institute (Passel, Capps and Fix 2004).

A large number of children and adolescents come with their immigrant parents, and through enrollment in elementary and secondary schools they become more integrated into U. S. society and culture (Escobar and Tran 2007). Courts have protected the right of undocumented children to attend elementary and secondary schools (Ruge and Iza 2005). After finishing high school, a significant number of these young people from diverse immigrant backgrounds wish to continue their education at the university level. Even though they have grown up in the United States, been part of the culture, received secondary education here, and often have distinguished academic records, many lack documentation and are still considered illegal aliens for purposes of higher education in all but ten states (Rincn 2008). In addition to the legal barriers for the undocumented, there are many linguistic and cultural barriers that

all immigrants face in U.S. higher education regardless of their immigration status.

## II. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

The intention of this article is to gain an in depth understanding of immigrants' experiences and their encounters with institutions of higher education, focusing on the nature of academic barriers and students' coping strategies in response to them. The situation of undocumented students, both in and out of universities, will receive special attention. Findings are based on a 2006 survey of a convenience sample of 149 students, both immigrant and non-immigrant, at two universities in Boston, Massachusetts, one public and one private. The sample included 106 females and 43 males; 27 students classified themselves as racial minorities. All but seven of the students were between the ages of 18 and 24. Eleven questions, some closed and some open ended, probed their experiences as, or with, immigrant students in the college classroom, especially the issue of immigrant students' inclusion and sense of belonging in the universities in question. In addition, I interviewed five professors located at both universities to probe their understanding of immigrant students, and effective ways of teaching them at their institutions. The conclusions offer several recommendations for how university professors can become more accommodating and welcoming to immigrant students, and how they might improve their success in university study. Lastly, I rely in the following explanations on some of my own experiences as a first-generation Brazilian immigrant who has earned bachelors and masters degrees in the United States and is currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Sociology at Boston University.

### III. DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION

In the U.S. people view education as a way out of poverty; however, to many immigrants the dream of pursuing a higher education and having a better life is far out of reach due to their immigrant status. According to Passel (2003), approximately 65,000 undocumented immigrant students graduate from U.S. high schools each year. Very few of these have access to higher education, although many seek it, even though they may be fully qualified from the standpoint of having shown good academic performance in secondary school (Capellaro 2003). Also public universities mostly consider them foreign students and charge them non-resident tuition and fees that can double or triple their university costs. Legislators in states with higher concentrations of immigrant children attending public schools have pushed for legislation, versions of the "Dream Act," which would allow undocumented students that have attended at least three years of secondary school in the U.S. to receive in-state tuition. After graduation or having reached the age of 21 they would be eligible to become permanent residents (Escobar and Tran 2007; Capellaro 2003). These acts recognize, in other words, the social and cultural embeddedness of the young people in the United States and offer them a pathway to regularizing their immigration status.

In the meantime, as of 2009 only ten states of the 50 in the United States have enacted legislation along the lines of the Dream Act making special provisions for these young people and allowing them to pay the regular resident rates for higher education. In other states, such as Massachusetts, however, the costs are prohibitive, and the requirements for legal documentation prevent students from qualifying for

admission. At the University Massachusetts Boston, for example, the full-time resident tuition rate for Massachusetts residents was \$11,291.00 per academic year in 2007, but for non-residents the rate was more than double that amount, at \$23,110.00. At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, non-resident immigrant students paid three times more than resident students. In the academic year 2003-2004 at Wisconsin, in-state tuition cost \$5,106.00 and out-of-state tuition cost \$17,858.00. Moreover, because they are not permanent residents or citizens, these students are not eligible for any type of financial aid, such as work-study grants, scholarships, or even loans. In most states, like these examples, non-resident tuition and fees are about double to triple the cost of resident tuition, a significant disincentive to enroll.

### IV. DIFFICULTIES FOR THOSE WHO FRAUDULENTLY GAIN ENTRY

Being undocumented begins to catch up with students when they graduate from high school and think about college attendance. In Massachusetts, for example, the John and Abigail Adams college scholarships are awarded to students who are high scorers on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) standardized tests; each year, however, some have to remain unused by those receiving them because they are undocumented, even though they might have attended Massachusetts schools for most of their schooling. Recently, "School officials say that at least four of those who received the John and Abigail Adams Scholarship were undocumented immigrants and thus do not qualify for the free tuition program." This is because "Federal law prohibits the distribution of government financial aid to those who are here illegally" (Lewis 2005).

Some immigrant children lacking documentation resort to using fraudulent doc-

uments to enter the university, including false social security numbers, or else manage to have tax ID numbers accepted by admissions offices as their social security numbers. As a result, these students are under considerable stress about being discovered, and many decide to stay isolated from normal student involvement in extra-curricular activities for fear of being detected. They also have trouble finding employment inside or outside of the university because of the lack of documents, which makes their financial situation more insecure.

These students are required by their circumstances to take low-paying jobs where they can be paid in cash only, so that their employment does not come to the attention of the authorities. This is a problem since in the United States expenses for university students are high, and many have to contribute to their own support, helping to pay tuition and fees, and also living expenses, often shared with their families. They also have to be very careful about revealing their illegal situation to employers, since employers can become liable for hiring or paying them.

The university is far from a protected sphere, since regulations are particularly strong against paying students any wages or salaries for any kind of work if they lack official permission for employment. Many university students are working outside jobs over forty hours per week, while taking full-time academic loads as well. This is very detrimental to the economic situation of both undocumented immigrant students and foreign students from other countries attending on student visas, who also are not eligible to work for pay except under very limited circumstances. The result is that these students are not eligible for working as assistants in the classroom or a laboratory, or on research projects taking place within the university, both of which are important means of gaining supplementary education and training in their

chosen fields. Neither can they consider taking paid internships.

All these financial constraints negatively impact the quality of their education. These students' attention to their studies, their grades in courses, and the sense of security they have as students all suffer as a result. Ironically, even though immigrant students regularly sit in front of their professors in their classroom, faculty usually have no idea of the students' precarious situation or understand why they seem to evade taking paid opportunities that they have earned on the basis of their qualifications.

## **V. CULTURAL DIFFICULTIES FOR ALL IMMIGRANT STUDENTS, DOCUMENTED AND UNDOCUMENTED: TREATMENT BY FACULTY AND STAFF**

Once in the university, with or without documentation, there are other problems that immigrant students commonly encounter with the higher education system, such as language barriers, different cultural assumptions, and professors who lack cultural sensitivity and openness, and who use rigid pedagogical models not suitable for culturally diverse students. Also, immigrant students often have difficulty finding social acceptance from their American peers in the classroom. In my interviews of immigrant students I learned firsthand that they, though from different countries, share similar struggles. My interview sample had students from Africa, Brazil, Cambodia, China, the Dominican Republic, England, Haiti, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Panama, Poland, Turkey, and Vietnam, and the challenges of adaptation they faced were mostly the same.

As a control group, I also sampled non-immigrant U.S. students to gain insight into their perspectives and experiences, and to see if they reported similar chal-

lenges and complaints about their higher educational experiences. In fact, none of the U.S. students in my sample reported having the problems common to immigrant students. Some native US students, however, through their own observations at the universities were aware of the differential treatment and experiences of their immigrant student peers. Some commented on immigrant students' struggles that were apparent to them from sharing classrooms. One U.S. student wrote, for example, "Students...from different cultures are made to feel dumb. This makes the school experience very difficult, frustrating, and unenjoyable."

In my sample, all the immigrant students answered that sometimes they experience communication problems at the universities and some awkwardness due to miscommunication with professors and other students, mainly because many make assumptions and stereotype them in ways that minimize or underestimate their abilities or intelligence. The most common problems reported by students were: professor and native peer impatience with their language use or accent; different cultural assumptions; lack of social acceptance from peers; and some administrative impediments for non-citizens, such as excessive and complicated paper work. What seems to be the hardest thing to deal with are professors who lack cultural sensitivity and openness, and who still use rigid pedagogical models not suitable for culturally diverse students, especially those that disallow students from addressing their own cultural backgrounds in their education. Too often the so-called "regular" curriculum is culturally biased and assumes that all learners share the same social and cultural experience in their backgrounds. Some professors even make offensive remarks about social groups, cultures, and ways of life that fall outside what is considered the American norm. Often immigrant students find their own cultures or coun-

tries of origin depreciated through these remarks, making them feel uncomfortable and out of place in the classroom.

As a result, classroom environments can be exclusionary and unfriendly. One professor, who teaches psychology, told me that universities are large and cold places, and that most of the undergraduate students arrive without understanding that they are entering a training camp in which only the strongest of mind, and the most audacious, goal-oriented and resourceful students will achieve their goals. Universities, he said, are impersonal places which are established to teach people about keeping schedules, learning organization skills, and developing a thick skin and coping skills that later can be used in positions of employment, as much as they are about acquiring knowledge.

Most professors are aware, and it is apparent to students, especially immigrants who do not take these cultural assumptions for granted, that universities teach their own "hidden curriculum" of values and behavioral norms, apart from the regular, academic curriculum. The sooner students learn to understand the universities' culture, the better chance of success they will have. Partially, the professor mentioned earlier was right; universities tend to be large and can be cold places. Yet, many immigrant students say their experiences are different. In my own experience, the subcultures of universities can be welcoming and supportive, but they are neither color nor culture blind.

In Zamel and Spack's, *Crossing the Curriculum: Multi-Lingual Learners in College Classrooms* (2004), Tim Sieber documented the shift in the student body at the University of Massachusetts Boston since the 1970s from being "Judeo-Christian, U.S. born white and English speaking to a multi-national, multi-language, multi-cultural population" (Sieber 2004: 130). While he witnessed this shift in the Boston Metropolitan area, this sea change in the compo-

sition of student bodies was also happening across the country. Traditionalist faculty became alarmed about this high influx of students who were from diverse cultural backgrounds, and non-native speakers of English. These professors perceived them as being 'unqualified,' because "they use the written and spoken language in ways sometimes different from native speakers" (Sieber 2004: 139). Even though this country is made up of immigrants, as always it seems that the ones who arrive first feel that they are more 'American' and have a sense of entitlement, and it appears this can apply to professors and students in universities as well.

Solomon argues that the American educational system is a "conveyor of norms that work to shape and direct within the American consciousness those groups distinguished by the term 'minority status.' This in turn, sometimes leads to negative attitudes and negative behavior toward minority groups," such as in "institutions of education and law [that] are ill-equipped to meet the world of 'cultural minorities'" (Solomon 1985: 91). To truly embrace the promise of higher education for immigrant students, professors need to be more knowledgeable about cultural diversity in their classrooms, and universities should implement strong academic support centers to supplement what professors do. It is also important for professors and the university to publicize to students the opportunities for help that are available. Professors could provide this information in their syllabi.

## **VI. STEREOTYPICAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT IMMIGRANT STUDENTS**

Many professors feel uncomfortable with the idea of creating classrooms that are suitable for multicultural students. Many approach this topic with a mindset that minorities and immigrant students

cannot handle the same level of work as native students and that accommodating their needs means lowering standards. Lower standards, however, are not what immigrant students want. My survey and interviews indicated that immigrant and minority students do not want to be treated as if they are incapable of doing the work; on the contrary, they want to be seen as equally capable as native students. They just want fair treatment and a positive and supportive attitude from their professors. They would like approval and the feeling that the professors believe that they can do the work. As one wrote, "The teachers should not lower their standards. They must be sure that each student is adequately prepared. For students that need extra help, the teacher should direct them to that."

The most damaging thing that can happen to students is for professors to suggest they lack academic skills, and to make them feel that they should not be at the university, or for professors to make culturally insensitive comments. In my own personal experience as an immigrant student, for example, and there are many cases to report, one graduate-level professor continually emphasized to the class that bilingual students would not be able to grasp the material well. When I approached the professor with a question about the course one day, she did not answer my question, but patted me on the back, and said patronizingly, "That's okay, it's not your fault!" Another professor walked into class the first day and announced that, "Anyone whose English is not their first language, I advise to save your money and leave the class right now, since you will not pass this course." Students who write well, and submit good papers, are often suspected of plagiarizing and are interrogated about their work. Such comments or attitudes are especially damaging to immigrant students who are the first in their families to attend university, since they often feel insecure about their

place in the institution to begin with, and not like some other students, entitled by their background to be there.

## **VII. IMMIGRANT STUDENTS' COPING STRATEGIES, ADVICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Immigrant students use many coping strategies to adapt and succeed in these sometimes exclusionary, foreign, or hostile university environments. They include being selective in deciding which disciplines and professors to work with, finding support and building social networks among other students who may be facing the same issues, and being aggressive in finding academic support, mentoring, and assistance from administrators, professors, and student service offices. Becoming involved in student organizations can also help students to become more accepted and integrated into the university environment. Another coping strategy is to construct an information network among other students where you can discover which professors are desirable to work with and which are to be avoided for reasons of insensitivity and rigidity. Immigrant students seek high quality, strong professors who challenge them academically, but who are also culturally sensitive and supportive in helping students achieve their goals. Immigrant students and their advocates share among their own social networks information about who the more challenging, respectful teachers are. Interpersonal contacts as well as internet social websites can be useful to students in building ties and gaining information.

After talking with my survey respondents and hearing about their struggles, I asked, "Why didn't you quit?" Some replied in the same vein as the student who said, "Quitting is not an option when you came from a country where education is out of reach, and here you have the oppor-

tunity to better your life through education. You have to grab it with both hands." They say that you have to be persistent and goal oriented, and you must "not let mean-spirited professors get in the way of achieving your dreams." Furthermore, "You must treat school as a job; you go in, do what you're supposed to do, and then go home." Students also spoke of struggling not to become discouraged when many people made them feel that they did not belong.

More mature students avoid the social problems of being in school by being very focused and instrumental in their work at the university. One said, for example, "Remind yourself that you are not there to make friends but to learn and get a degree, which is a passport to a better life for yourself and your family members that you are financially helping back at home." Some report that it's also very important to learn about good professors and staff members that will help you when you are in need. Another student said, "When you are discouraged, remember that only three percent of the world population gets to attend a college or university. You have what it takes to get through. Let your stubbornness drive you. Table 1 provides an outline of students' most commonly used strategies.

## **VIII. ADVICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KNOWLEDGEABLE PROFESSORS**

I also interviewed five professors from two different Boston-area universities who have extensive experience with immigrant students and are knowledgeable about their situation and their struggles. Professors report witnessing in their classrooms unwelcoming behavior by some native students toward their immigrant peers, sometimes even including use of insulting ethnic slurs against them and their groups. Other students also show displeasure and impatience with immigrant students' slower

**Table 1: Coping Strategies for Student Academic Survival**

1. Be selective in choosing majors and professors who welcome immigrants and are inclusive of students from diverse backgrounds.
2. Build supportive social networks among other students who are facing the same challenges of adaptation and acceptance.
3. Social networking websites, such as MySpace, Classmates Online, Facebook, Hi-5, Instant Messenger, and Orkut may be useful tools for sustaining local networks.
4. Share information to discover high quality, strong, and respectful professors who recognize your potential and who will challenge you academically.
5. Actively seek academic tutoring, mentoring, and assistance from administrators, professors, and student service offices.
6. Join student organizations to become more integrated into the university and gain knowledge about available resources.
7. If the social environment is isolating, remember that you are at school principally to work on a degree, not have a social life.
8. If you encounter an insensitive or rigid academic environment, take an instrumental attitude toward school, seeing it as a job where you are improving your skills and credentials, allowing a better life for you and for your family.
9. Remember that being a university student is a privileged position, enjoyed by only 3% of the world's population.

way of speaking and with their surface errors in English grammar or vocabulary. All five professors interviewed admitted that they had observed examples of all the problem situations immigrant students, as well as domestic minorities, typically encounter. Immigrant students have come to them to complain and to seek advice about how to handle these situations, such as other professors making stereotypical comments about their group while staring directly at them, or diminishing their academic promise by making remarks such as, 'Not everyone is cut out to get a university degree.'

These professors had suggestions about how to make the higher education classroom more welcoming for immigrant students. Since immigrant students often feel out of place and even unwelcome in the university, it is important to show acceptance and respect to these students. Professors need to speak with them in a positive, friendly way and to call on them in class and otherwise promote their active partici-

pation in the classroom. Their comments were reminiscent of the recommendations of Lilia Bartolomé in her recent, "Authentic Care and Respect in Minority Education: the Political and Ideological Dimensions of Love" (2008), which states the strong case for showing respect, and genuine caring, for students' struggles as the *sine qua non* of effective teaching.

It is helpful for professors to accept students as serious learners and to become engaged with them in order to draw out their participation, as they may be shy or uncertain about whether their participation is welcome. This is reminiscent of one of the student comments I received: "The more a teacher is willing to get involved, the more a student wants to learn. The more comfortable a teacher and students can be together, the more true learning will go on."

Also, it is important to provide opportunities, where the material allows, for immigrant students to teach other students about what they know, including their ex-



perience living as immigrant minorities in the host country. The content of their ideas, perspectives, and opinions needs to be valued, and students need to be encouraged and rewarded for voicing their thinking, even if they have accents or less than perfect English. One professor said, "Students usually understand the material well and have strong ideas about it, even when they are not able to put their ideas on paper in a manner that matches native speakers." It is important to credit immigrant students, publicly in class discussion and in comments on papers, for what they know and understand.

More and more research emphasizes how engaged immigrant students are in working in their university studies to develop English as their second, third, or even fourth language. This research points out the need for professors to assess the students' ideas, rather than focusing on surface grammatical imperfections that normally correct themselves with time or good editing (Zamel and Spack 2004). In this context, it is important for professors to be patient with immigrant students and recognize that they are still learning how to express themselves clearly in written English. Moreover, it is important to assure them that speaking English with an accent is not a barrier to being understood or having good ideas. As one student remarked, "We might talk with an accent, but we don't think with one."

## IX. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Many professors still use rigid pedagogical models that are narrowly based on their outmoded conceptions of who their students are, and they are not incorporating in their classroom the latest thinking on how to help immigrant students maximize their abilities. The emerging higher education research literature, written by researchers, practicing teaching professors,

or even immigrant students themselves, is vast on the United States situation alone. Zamel and Spack (2004), for example, collect accounts by teachers and students of successful integration of non-native English speakers into a wide variety of university programs, as do Ybarra and Lopez (2004) in their own anthology on education of Latino university students. Kingston-Mann and Sieber (2001) present accounts by practicing professors of their successful efforts to learn more about student diversity, and to devise effective teaching strategies that promote inclusion and academic success for immigrant and minority students.

George Vernez (1996) provides a useful overview of problems and best practices regarding immigrants in education, including higher education. Goodwin (2002) and Goodwin and Weis (2006) explain problems for disadvantaged students, including immigrants, in surviving college, while other works like Bernal et al (2006) on Latinas, and Rincn's (2008) on undocumented immigrants, focus on specific populations. Revealing accounts are also being increasingly published that directly feature immigrant student voices, such as Escobar and Tran's book (2007) on undocumented students in California, and others on Asian Americans (Garrod and Kilkenny 2007) and Latinos (Garrod, Kilkenny and Gomez 2007). Resources are clearly available that can guide faculty development programs for professors who wish to improve their performance with immigrant students.

Too often professors have a "one model fits all" approach to teaching that requires immigrant students to discuss issues and experiences that they are not likely to have ever had. In the US, typically, they make an assumption that all their students have had a common U.S. upbringing, and that if they have not, then it is their first duty to familiarize themselves with what U.S. students know from their life experience. Some professors never invite immigrant students to

speak or write about what they know best, that is their own lives or cultural experiences, as material for study, discussion, or analysis.

Recognizing that students have different origins and cultures can help professors be more flexible about how they permit students to use and apply their learned knowledge, choose case materials for in-depth study or research papers, and demonstrate that they have comprehension of the course material. Knowledgeable professors are more flexible about allowing students to apply their learning to different issues and problems, especially ones that make sense in terms of what they have known in their cultural backgrounds and life experiences.

Immigrant students are motivated and are willing to work extremely hard. They have many struggles that natives cannot relate to, nor have to face, while pursuing their higher education. It is hoped that these suggestions will help professors and university administrators better understand and accept immigrant students who are committed to learning. Universities need to recognize that if they are going to have diverse student bodies—more and more inevitable due to today's changing national demographics—they must be proactive in providing a place of comfort and support that allows learning to take place, and students to apply their skills to their educational tasks. Universities should encourage learning in all students and provide as many opportunities for success as possible.

In the meantime, immigrant students struggling to succeed in the university cannot wait for all professors to become educated to the changing realities of higher learning in our time of globalization, transnationalism, cultural change and hybridity, and migration of peoples and cultures. Students can and must continue to depend on one another for support, advice, and learning as they make their way through the academy. Their challenge is to discover the professors, advisors, courses of study,

and particular classrooms that welcome the gifts and the challenges that they, as immigrant students, bring to today's higher education. Fortunately, there are allies to be found among faculty and staff at universities who understand the benefits that immigrant students offer in promoting U.S. higher education's renewal and the full achievement of its promise in the 21st century.

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