INTERNATIONALS NETWORK

Learning Brief 1

Immigrants, English Learners and Post-Secondary Pathways: Framing the issue

Abstract

Nearly 1 in 3 students attending college in the United States are foreign-born or children of immigrants. This highly diverse group includes not only international students, but also immigrants and children of immigrants educated in U.S. high schools. Scant research has focused on specific pathways of immigrant students and English learners (ELs or former ELs) who enter post-secondary pathways after graduating from U.S. high schools, which is surprising given the size of this student subgroup and the robust student information systems that most colleges and universities use to track student enrollment and achievement. The absence of research on this population may be in part due to their lack of visibility as a unique student subgroup – their demographics and achievement indicators are frequently combined with those of international students or of the general U.S.-born school populations. Domestically educated immigrants and children of immigrants are the focus of this first in Internationals Network's Learning Briefs *series. In the pages that follow we detail what we uncovered when we set out to explore and document the post-secondary pathways of multiple high school graduation cohorts of immigrant students who entered high school as English learners and after graduation entered college.*

"Domestic immigrant postsecondary students are an established sector of U.S. society who have graduated from U.S. high schools and transitioned into postsecondary pathways. The size of this subgroup of students grew between 2000 and 2018 as more first generation immigrant students entered college."

Introduction

Nearly 1 in 3 college students in the United States are foreign-born or children of immigrants. A highly diverse group, they include international students, immigrants and children of immigrants and include U.S.-born as well as naturalized citizens, permanent residents as well as undocumented U.S. residents. They are speakers of a vast diversity of languages, and have diverse ethnic backgrounds and racial identities. Despite their numbers in universities little has been written about immigrant students and English learners (ELs or former ELs) who graduated from U.S. secondary schools and their experiences in post-secondary pathways. This is in part due to their lack of visibility as a unique student subgroup – their demographics and achievement indicators are frequently combined with those of international students or of the general U.S.-born school populations. The former is a distinct subgroup whose members generally do not self-identify as immigrants, did not attend U.S. secondary schools, and often have families who are able to finance their education. While U.S.-born students who transition from high school to college may share similarities with immigrant college-goers along racial and socio-economic lines, they are neither U.S. resident immigrants nor English learners. Educational institutions both K-12 and in higher education manage robust student information systems that gather detailed information on student demographics, enrollment, and achievement, but still we know little about the pathways and experiences specifically of domestic immigrant students and English learners (ELs or former ELs) in post-secondary pathways.

Domestic immigrant postsecondary students are an established sector of U.S. society who have graduated from U.S. high schools and transitioned into postsecondary pathways. The size of this subgroup of students grew between 2000 and 2018 as more first generation immigrant students entered college. Though we do not know their exact

[1] https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/national/national-data/

[2] ibid.

numbers, we know that of a total 19.6 million undergraduate and graduate students in the U.S., first generation domestic immigrants make up 1.7 million, or 8.6%.[3] Due to the limitations of the postsecondary datasets, we do not know how many of these arrived in middle and high school and were classified as English language learners. Despite the diversity among U.S. immigrant postsecondary students, data on them are often combined with that of international students or with U.S.-born students of color.

In contrast to international students, who make up a significant portion of the student population in colleges and universities, domestic immigrant students[4] are on the whole lower income than international students. They have parents from working class backgrounds in their home countries who may or may not have completed formal education, may be living with relatives or guardians, may have experienced family separation and reunification and may live in mixed status families. Some, but not all, are eligible for federal and state financial assistance for college.

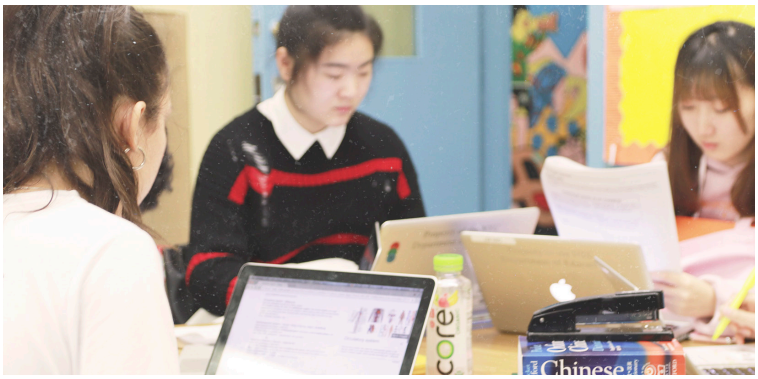
This is the first in a series of research and practice briefs that share lessons from educators working across Internationals Network for Public Schools. In this brief we share what happened when educators across Internationals Network set out to illuminate the post-secondary pathways of our immigrant high school graduates. Throughout these series of learning briefs, we share our approach, our insights, findings and lessons learned, as well as tools and strategies that can strengthen your own work or research with immigrant-origin students.

Why Focus on U.S. Immigrant Postsecondary Students?

Within the vast body of scholarship on post-secondary access,[5] there is unanimous agreement on the important role that post-secondary education can play as a driver of opportunity and upward mobility. As newcomers to the U.S. educational system, recent immigrant students who graduate from U.S. high schools face a series of monumental tasks to make them eligible to attend and be informed enough to apply to and enroll in college. These include developing English proficiency, not just in spoken English but at a college-ready academic level in reading and writing; accumulating enough high school credits to complete a diploma; involving parents or caregivers in the process, as they often are unfamiliar with the U.S. postsecondary landscape; completing the many steps in the college application process; navigating a dizzying labyrinth of financial aid processes and deadlines; making informed decisions about where to apply and which offer to accept; and finally, enrolling and navigating the significant transition to the first year of college. Adolescents who are new to the U.S. face these challenges while they are also adapting to a new country, reuniting with or being separated from family, and dealing with the trauma of displacement, loss, and of the adaptation process itself.[6]

In postsecondary datasets ranging from college diversity statistics to student retention and graduation rates, immigrant-origin U.S. high school graduates tend to be lumped in with foreign-born international students or with U.S.-born students of color. While there are issues common among and across these groups, there are concerns and challenges that are unique to domestic immigrant students. They represent a growing subpopulation of students whose realities and experiences disappear in college datasets and in many national reports on postsecondary access and completion.

The implications of overlooking this subset of students could not be more dire. At the college readiness level, it means they may not have access to credit-bearing coursework and guidance needed to prepare them. At the postsecondary level, it means that their needs – academic, linguistic, socio-emotional, or financial – may be overlooked. College trajectories of these students, many of whom are English learners or former EL (students who tested out of ESL services during high school) remain under-examined and not fully understood.[7]



[3] Batalova and Feldblum (2000). Immigrant-Origin students in U.S. higher education: A data profile.

[4] Our term "domestic immigrant students" refers to foreign-born students who immigrate to the U.S. in middle or high school and complete their high school in the U.S. They are both a specific subset of "Generation 1.5" and also include students who enter the U.S. alone or as unaccompanied minors or young adults age 18-21.

[5] Adelman, 2006; Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner and Yagan, 2017; Conley, 2008; Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, 2004; Swail, 2000

[6] Patel et al., 2016; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2010

[7] Louie, 2007.

What do we know about Domestic Immigrant College Students?

The available data, although limited, reveal lagging rates of college access, persistence and completion among ELs compared to all other subgroups.[8] Because the bulk of the research on this population has focused on English proficiency, we know that having been an English Learner in high school is highly correlated with placement in college level remedial English or in English as a Second Language courses. Firstly, this is in addition to being discouraging, especially when students have demonstrated proficiency on the same exams taken by their U.S.-born native English-speaking peers. Secondly, it costs students money and time on their pathway toward graduation, as remedial courses often do not award credit upon completion.[9] One study calculated the additional cost of remediation to be an average of $3,000 per student. Financial aid is often limited to five or six years of funding, such that each semester of non-credit-bearing remediation shortens the time a student can spend on the core of their academic studies without paying out of pocket or taking out loans. More time spent in remediation and ESL can become structural and financial traps for immigrant high school graduates.

It is timely for research to explore the post-secondary pathways of first generation students who are ELs and former ELs. Though we know the total numbers of first generation immigrants enrolled in college at the national and state level,[10] we do not know who among them graduated from U.S. high schools, what their characteristics are nor who among this cohort enrolls, persists or completes a degree within and across subgroups. While success stories of high achieving immigrant college graduates appear in the media, we cannot currently look to research or large scale datasets to understand the pathways of successful domestic immigrant students, what their high schools did to prepare them, and whether they are the norm or the exception. An examination of data on college attainment (NCES) suggests that many *foreign-born* in the U.S.[11] (not only immigrant ELs) do not apply, never enroll after being accepted to college, or do not complete a college degree.[12] Callahan & Gandara (2000) have critiqued the lack of investigation and attention to college going among immigrant students and ELs as a lack of political will.

Although 38 percent of high school ELs are foreign born, *there is no national dataset that tracks their post-secondary enrollment and completion patterns as a subgroup.* This is a stunning gap in national datasets. Neither colleges nor the National Center for Education Statistics gather data or publicly report on English Learners, reclassified or former ELs or immigrant high school graduates as a subgroup. This is surprising, given the level of detailed data that is gathered on their demographics and achievement in the K-12 context. ELs and former ELs suddenly disappear in post-secondary datasets.

To compound this gap, no post-secondary institutions, including the City University of New York, identify enrolled students in a way that enables researchers to explore the trajectories of ELs and former ELs who are not international students, but foreign-born U.S. high school graduates. Many, though not all, international students come from wealthy, formally educated families and come to the United States exclusively to attend college or university. They differ markedly from students who immigrated to the U.S. to attend high school or came as unaccompanied refugee youth and may be the first person in their family to complete secondary education.[13]

About Internationals Network for Public Schools

As the only school development and support organization in the U.S. dedicated to addressing the needs of immigrant multilingual learners, Internationals Network has developed deep expertise in how to design and support school settings to ensure student success. The more than 9,000 youth who enroll each year in Internationals Network's public secondary school programs are immigrant multilingual learners who emigrate to the U.S. during their adolescent years and enroll in U.S. schools for the first time in middle or high school. As an organization, we have deep knowledge of the field and our students. Built into the design of our schools and programs are structures, strategies and processes to ensure that students and their families learn about post-secondary options. Because all of our students are a few years shy of applying to college, Internationals Network schools recognize the importance of supporting them to prepare for their journey beyond high school graduation.

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8 Klein et al., 2004; Yanno & Cromley, 2015
9 Bunch & Endris, 2012; Hilliard, 2017; Koyama, 2007; Leki, 2007; Louie, 2007; Marshall, 2010.
10 Batalova and Feldblum (2000). Immigrant-Origin students in U.S. higher education: A data profile.
11 These data include Internationals graduates but also many others, including people who entered the U.S. as adults.
12 Kanno & Cromley, 2012; Nuñez & Sparks, 2012
13 Teranishi Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011

Our Approach to this issue

Immigrant multilingual learners like those in Internationals Network schools have been the focus of educational research for more than five decades. Educators who work with this population recognize the wealth of resources and expertise they bring to their classrooms and school communities. This includes linguistic resources, skills to navigate multiple complex cultural contexts, extensive background knowledge from their countries of origin, and high aspirations for themselves, their academic and career pathways and their futures.

Even with these resources, structural and systemic barriers have made success for many of these youth a distant goal.[14] Their poor academic outcomes in traditional high schools[15] and their linguistic marginalization and "minoritization" have been studied at length.[16] In the political context of the United States in the second decade of the 21st Century, persistent xenophobia forces them to navigate an openly hostile environment.[17]

With so many barriers in high school, it might be tempting to view college as far off for immigrants and English learners. Ignoring what comes after graduation for the students our schools have worked so hard to support toward graduation would represent a lost opportunity. Just as in high school, immigrant high school graduates face unique challenges when it comes to college access and success. They are over-represented in remedial programs, yet they bring rich linguistic and cultural assets; they have limited access to federal or state funding due to immigration status, yet many of them work and pay taxes; family financial obligations often require them to work while attending college, yet they also serve as primary translators for their family members and guardians for their younger siblings. Cultural, linguistic and structural factors impede their progress and success;[18] and the currently shifting sands of U.S. immigration policy threatens their legal status, residency in the U.S. and access to public benefits.[19]

Funded by a generous grant from The Carroll and Milton Petrie Foundation, Internationals Network set out to build a postsecondary access project in which we would use data to explore enrollment, persistence and completion rates of our graduates and support schools in our network to better support their students toward postsecondary success. As part of this project, examining the pathways taken by Internationals Network students after they graduate successfully from our network of innovative schools can help us better understand how well we are preparing them for college and how we might support schools to help them be better prepared, help them through the transition and to overcome obstacles they face in pursuit of a post-secondary degree.

Supports and guidance Internationals Network has provided to our 15 New York City-based high schools in this area have aimed to help them do the following:

- Set up and strengthen systems and processes for college advising and tracking student applications;
- Identify "best fit" colleges based on student interest, GPA and strengths;
- Organize in-person and virtual school visits;
- Connect with admissions staff in colleges of interest to students;
- Offer dual enrollment coursework;
- Use data to understand which of their graduates enroll, persist and complete college.

The data exploration has been an attempt to test our assumptions about students' access to and readiness for college and to address gaps in available postsecondary data. Data can be a tool to help us learn how best to support students. The data we have used to do this are drawn from analysis of post-secondary patterns of graduating cohorts of Internationals Network graduates in partnership with National Student Clearinghouse, the leading national organization that provides secure data transmission and analysis of nearly all U.S. post-secondary institutions using data matching. Internationals Network submits lists of graduates for each graduating year and receives a dataset three times each year with the most up-to-date details on each graduate's enrollment, persistence and completion patterns, including the institution where they enroll.

14 Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix and Clewell (2000).
15 Ruiz-de-Velasco, et al.2000, Cummins, 2000; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018; Wiley & Lukes, 2015; Wright, 2010.
16 Alim, Rickford & Ball, 2016; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Ramirez et al 1991; Wiley & Lukes, 2015.
17 Gándara and Ee, 2019.
18 Callahan & Gandara, 2004; Covarrubias & Lara, 2013; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Kao and Thompson, 2003; Yanno & Cromley, 2013.
19 Berstein, Gonzalez, Karpman and Zuckerman, 2019; Gándara and Ee, 2019.

What we learned: Findings

The data revealed promising news. Large numbers of graduates from our New York City Network schools enrolled in college, in line with the national average. More than half of NYC Internationals graduates[20] enroll in college after graduating from an Internationals Network school (see figure 1). The national trend for college enrollment of U.S. high school graduates is about 70%, which differs markedly across economic, racial and geographic subgroups. Because of the lack of data disaggregation, we are not able to find a precise comparison for our population, but we know that about 30% of students from high poverty urban schools (similar to our schools) enroll in college, due to some of the same overlapping barriers that newcomer immigrant high school students face. Data from previous studies of ELs in postsecondary settings conducted by Kanno and others revealed that more than half of ELs never enrolled in college and after 8 years, fewer than 1 in 6 had attained a bachelor's degree.

New York City Internationals Network students who graduated in 2019 (both June and August graduates) had initial lower rates of enrollment immediately after graduation, a trend that we have observed across all graduating cohorts from 2013 to the present. By 18 months after graduation, 67% of 2018 graduates had enrolled in college (720 students total). Students from the classes of 2013-2017 had higher rates of overall enrollment, which we attribute mostly to the additional time these students have had to enroll.

"More than half of Internationals graduates enroll in college after graduating from an Internationals Network school."

As discussed previously, a gap in data prevents us from comparing Internationals graduates with students from similar backgrounds (EL, immigrant, first entering the U.S. in secondary school), so we are left to compare them to a somewhat comparable subgroup that we can identify in national datasets. Across the network, Internationals schools serve primarily low-income, urban students of color. The national trend for enrollment after high school for this subgroup was 56% according to data released in 2016 by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Notable is a trend: Internationals New York City graduates take advantage of the public university system, both community colleges and four year institutions. The City University of New York is the most attended institution by far by Internationals New York City graduates, likely due to its affordability and accessibility.

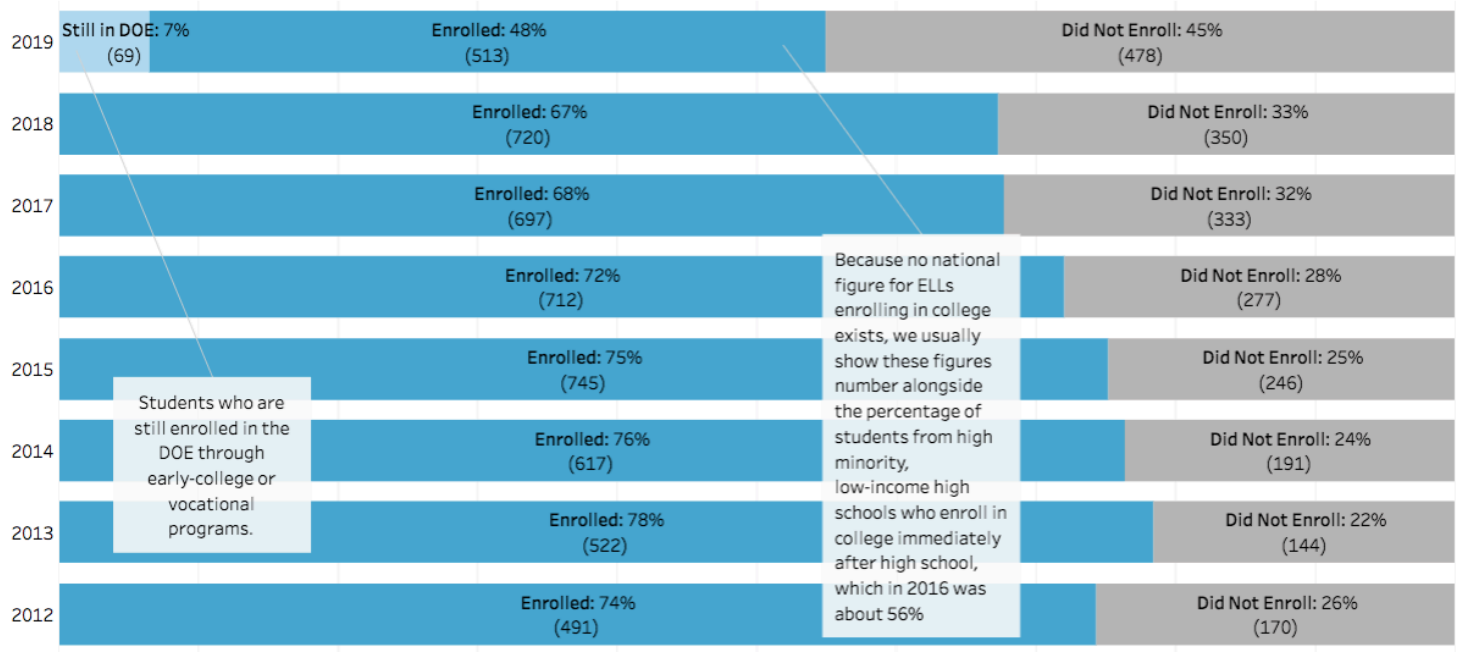

Figure 1: Percentage of NYC Internationals Network Students Enrolling in College by High School Graduation Year (April `20)

20 To avoid confusion, we refer to "Internationals graduates" as students who graduated from Internationals Network high schools with a diploma, not college graduates.

Among those who entered college, between 35% and 41% of enrollees left college altogether before completing a degree. This is regrettable, but reflects an outcome that is in fact better than the national average. It is important to remember that attrition is the norm in postsecondary pathways, in particular among low-income students in public institutions. As Sara Goldrick-Rab's research has shown, the greatest barrier to college completion is financial, not academic in the U.S. Across the nation, an average of only about 50% of all college entrants in the United States will go on to complete a degree. Yet that 50% represents not all high school graduates, but only the portion of high school graduates (70%) who enroll on average in college in the first place. So about half (50%) of the 70% of each year's high school graduates in the U.S. will earn a degree, or 35 out of every 100 (35%).

For English language learners, the average high school completion rate in schools outside of Internationals Network across the U.S. is about 67% (though this number is inexact due to nuances in metrics that differ from state to state). Figure 2 above illustrates how, as a network, Internationals Network graduates compare in high school graduation, college enrollment and degree completion with a comparable set of peers across the United States.

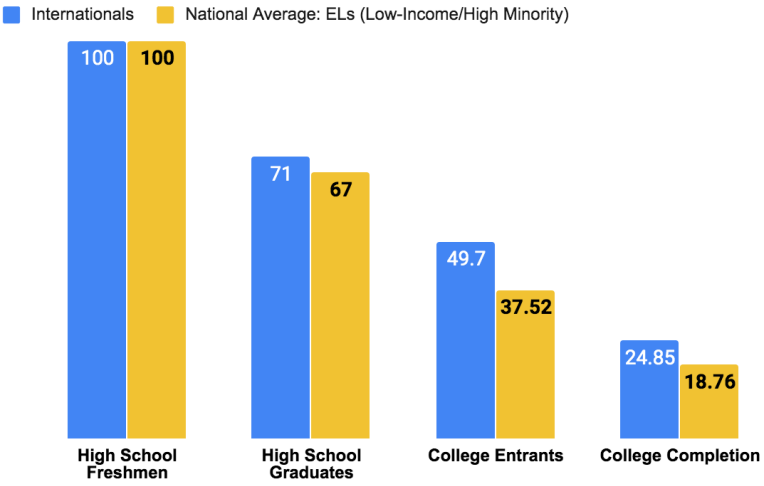

Figure 2: College Degree Completion, Internationals Graduates vs. National Average

Perspectives from the Field

When we shared the data among our staff and schools, reactions varied. There was excitement, as we began to learn more about the postsecondary success of our students. We now had concrete numbers. Everyone expressed a desire to learn more and in more detail. Students appeared to be doing well.

Jon Harriman, principal at the International High School at Lafayette, was one of the first school leaders to explore the findings with his staff and our team. "This is fascinating," he said. "We are aware that most of our students attend a few specific public community colleges. We also know the limited college choices are not related to the quality of the education students receive here but to larger structural and systemic barriers. What we'd like to explore more is how our students fare on their journeys through college -- how our innovative practices prepare them for that journey and how they compare to students at the same institution from a similar demographic." His perspective about the value of the data informed our next steps and goal to seek more evidence of students' experiences in college.

Internationals Manager of College readiness, Khalia Joseph, was somewhat more skeptical about the value of the data: "There was so much detail there. It was really hard to see how it was helpful on its own. Counselors are making decisions that impact students today, tomorrow, and next week. We are trying to make decisions in November that affect students' college decisions the following April and May and here we are looking at findings from 6 years down the road. There are things that are much more pressing that impact students' lives and I didn't see them in the numbers." This realization mobilized us to look for more timely evidence of students' postsecondary journeys.

Implications and Next steps

What we learned from the data and from reactions to it led to some immediate next steps. Our initial findings on college enrollment from pre-Covid cohorts of graduates (2019 and prior) led us to engage a subgroup of our New York City-based Internationals Network schools in some strategic inquiry so that we could together examine, unpack and work to improve their school-based systems and supports for their immigrant students as they prepared them to graduate and embark on their postsecondary journeys. In addition, we sought out more detailed data from colleges that our students attend.

"An obvious next step for us was to explore processes and systems at the student, teacher, leader and staff level. How are our schools preparing students to apply, enroll and succeed in post-secondary pathways?"

Our mission as an organization is to prepare newly arrived immigrant high school students to succeed in high school and beyond. Internationals Network seeks to examine post-secondary patterns of our graduates so that we can better understand to what extent we are successful in that mission. From an organizational perspective, increasing what we know can help us to better support schools and to be strategic with our services. As a prominent national organization, this exploration also helps to illustrate what is possible when quality education is the focus and priority for our immigrant students.

At the high school level, our roles focus on preparing students to succeed once they graduate, diploma in hand. An obvious next step for us was to explore processes and systems at the student, teacher, leader and staff level. How are our schools preparing students to apply, enroll and succeed in post-secondary pathways? The next issue brief will explore what we learned through a collaborative strategic inquiry process with a small group of Internationals school leaders and college guidance staff.

The good news from that successful process is that of the approximately 264 graduates from the participating schools who engaged in that process, roughly 86% are slated to begin their Freshman year in college in Fall 2022, while others are waiting to hear from colleges where they applied, or are pursuing alternative and vocational pathways. Our next brief, **Using Process Mapping & Gap Analysis to Strengthen Systems for Post-Secondary Readiness** will appear in October 2022 and will detail how that process led to this success.

Tools and Resources

- Data inquiry protocol template
- NSC Research Center
  The research arm of the National Student Clearinghouse
- **Higher Education Immigration Portal**
  https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/
- **Migration Policy Institute report on Immigrant origin students in college**
  https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigrant-origin-students-US-higher-education

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Text: Marguerite Lukes, Ph.D. Dennis De Guzman Caindec, Ed.D., Robert Reynoso, Khalia Joseph
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