How Immigrant-Origin Leaders Contribute to U.S. Colleges and Universities

RAJIKA BHANDARI, MELQUIN RAMOS, AND MIRIAM FELDBLUM
The diversification of students and faculty on U.S. campuses has been accompanied by another shift: the growing numbers of immigrant-origin leaders of such campuses. A visit to most U.S. colleges and universities today reveals a visibly diverse academic workforce, including those who are foreign-born and whose presence has increased rapidly over the past three decades primarily due to the large growth of international students in the U.S. Since the Immigration Act of 1965, when the doors of U.S. academia were opened more widely to global talent, immigrant-origin faculty and leaders with roots in other countries and cultures have been an increasing part of the fabric of American higher education.

We first reported on this growing trend here, noting that despite their increasingly visible ranks, there is no good information, data, or narrative that documents the important role that such immigrant-born leaders play. It is widely acknowledged that in addition to their contributions to research and teaching, immigrant-origin faculty and leaders on U.S. campuses often play an instrumental role in furthering innovation, bilateral relations, and international collaboration between U.S. institutions and those in other countries while also hosting international students, postdocs, and visiting faculty from their country or region of origin. The presence of an international employee and student pool has enabled institutions to strengthen their global rankings and to demonstrate progress in internationalization and diversity on their campuses.

Yet, despite the growing presence of immigrant-origin leaders on U.S. campuses and their demonstrated value, there is scant and inconsistent evidence about the growth and trends of this population over time; their backgrounds and experiences navigating academia and our immigration system; and their specific, quantifiable contributions to U.S. postsecondary education, the economy, and society.

The Current Report: Enumerating immigrant-origin leaders

Building upon our earlier exploration of U.S. higher education as a pathway for immigrant-origin leaders, this current report presents a first-ever effort to enumerate the numbers of presidents and chancellors of U.S. campuses who are either first- or second-generation immigrants. Those who are first-generation have immigrated to the U.S. in a variety of ways, primarily through the pathway of higher education as international students or as children of immigrants or as refugees. Second-generation immigrant leaders are those who were themselves born in the U.S., but have at least one parent who was born in another country.

Our estimates by no means reflect a comprehensive count and details of all immigrant-origin campus leaders in the U.S., yet they provide a window into this subset of leaders and their demographics, as well as their impact on higher education and beyond.

We reviewed the presidents and chancellors of approximately 600 U.S. institutions. Here is what we found.

1 The specific pathway for international students from higher education to academic careers is discussed here.
Although occasional reports point to the increasing numbers of immigrant-origin campus leaders, no comprehensive count exists at the national level. This is largely due to definitional variations based on immigration status, race, and ethnicity, and varying conceptions of “international” faculty and leaders. Questions about national origin, citizenship and immigration status are often excluded from surveys of U.S. higher education, or such data is not gathered consistently. For example, while the American Council on Education’s (ACE) American College President Survey asks periodically about the birthplace and overseas education of its respondents, current data on these topics is not available and second-generation immigrant presidents might not be identifiable at all.

Who and How Many?

A GLARING LACK OF DATA

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Similarly, while the U.S. Department of Education’s IPEDS system includes a count of U.S. postsecondary faculty who are “non-resident aliens,” i.e. those who are still on temporary visas, it does not account for many of the foreign-born faculty and leaders because those who are permanent residents or naturalized citizens are included in the same category as U.S. citizens when tabulating demographic characteristics such as race and ethnicity. Still, the IPEDS/National Center for Education Statistics data does show that the proportion of “non-resident” instructional faculty among full-time faculty at U.S. higher education institutions more than doubled from 2.5% in 1999 (or 15,244) to 6.0% in 2022 (or 50,253).

At the institutional level, colleges and universities also do not track national origin data of their faculty and leaders. By the time foreign-born campus employees attain tenure or more senior leadership roles, they have likely progressed in their immigration status by attaining permanent residence (a green card) or even U.S. citizenship. As a result, they are counted as U.S. residents or citizens for the purposes of institutional and diversity data. In addition, second-generation immigrants who are campus leaders are not characterized by their immigration heritage or immigrant generational status—except perhaps as part of human interest stories—and are included within the broad category of being native-born as

### TOP 10 COUNTRIES OF FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANT ORIGIN PRESIDENTS AND CHANCELLORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>SHARE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19.08%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>36.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>173</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TOP THREE COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN OF FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANT LEADERS

- India (19%)
- Canada (10%)
- Cuba (6%)
opposed to first-generation immigrant leaders who are foreign-born. Our previous article discusses in detail the complex interplay of race, culture and diversity that affects immigrant-origin faculty and leaders on U.S. campuses.

HOW DID WE COUNT IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN PRESIDENTS AND CHANCELLORS?

To fill the gap in national-level data on immigrant-origin campus leaders, the Presidents’ Alliance employed a multipronged approach to gather information on first- and second-generation immigrant-origin leaders. First, we accessed the Presidents’ Alliance member list, a database that captures the details of presidents and chancellors (names, institutions, states, and roles) at a range of U.S. higher education institutions, including public, private, 4-year, and community colleges. Second, moving beyond Presidents’ Alliance members, we conducted additional desk research focused on U.S. college and university presidents and chancellors in office between 2013-2024, carefully gathering information to ensure a thorough representation of leadership demographics. This research included reviewing biographies on institutional and organizational websites and various media platforms. In total, our research covered approximately 600 U.S. colleges and universities.

220 IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN PRESIDENTS AND CHANCELLORS have led U.S. higher education institutions over the past decade (2013 - 2024)

173 FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS and former international students

47 SECOND-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS*

* We recognize that the count of second-generation immigrant leaders is an underestimate as it is difficult to discern their immigrant pathways.

32% OF THESE IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN LEADERS ARE WOMEN

15 immigrant-origin presidents and chancellors, specifically first-generation immigrants and former international students, HAVE LED TWO OR MORE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS DURING THIS TIME PERIOD.

217 UNIQUE INSTITUTIONS HAVE HAD AN IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN LEADER
The Face of Immigrant-origin Campus Leadership: 20 Leaders

To add context to the numbers above, we share a few profiles of U.S. campus leaders whose pathways reflect their diverse origins as well as the range of institutions that they lead.2

FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANT LEADERS

• Reginald DesRoches, Ph.D.  President, Rice University
  Originally from Haiti, Dr. DesRoches arrived in the U.S. as a child in the late 1960s. At his inauguration, Dr. DesRoches shared about his parents’ sacrifices, having immigrated to the U.S. to provide their family with a better life. At Rice University, he also serves as a professor of civil and environmental engineering and professor of mechanical engineering. Dr. DesRoches made history as the first Black immigrant to lead Rice University.

• Pam Eddinger, Ph.D.  President, Bunker Hill Community College
  Dr. Eddinger, who also served as President of Moorpark College from 2008-2013, immigrated to the U.S. from Hong Kong at the age of 11. She has worked at community colleges for over 25 years, holding positions ranging from academics and student affairs, communications and policy, and executive leadership.

• Farnam Jahanian, Ph.D.  President, Carnegie Mellon University
  Born in Iran, Dr. Jahanian, a computer scientist and entrepreneur, arrived in Texas at the age of 16 to attend high school. After attending an all-boys Catholic high school, he went on to receive undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Texas at Austin, respectively. Dr. Jahanian was among the 2016 Great Immigrants recognized by the Carnegie Corporation.

• Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval, Ph.D.  President, California State University, Fresno (Fresno State)
  “Dr. Jiménez-Sandoval is an immigrant to the San Joaquin Valley, having arrived in the region from Mexico as a 10-year-old. He worked [on] his father’s small farm, and grew to appreciate the many cultures, languages and communities of the Valley,” reports Fresno State. After serving over two decades on campus in senior administrative positions, Dr. Jiménez-Sandoval was named Fresno State’s ninth president in 2021.

• Yves Salomon-Fernández, Ph.D.  President, Urban College of Boston
  Dr. Salomon-Fernández hails from Haiti, having emigrated to the U.S. with her family at the age of 12. She has led multiple institutions as president, including Massachusetts Bay Community College, Cumberland County College, Greenfield Community College, and most recently Urban College of Boston. In 2018, Dr. Salomon-Fernández was named among the Top 25 Women in Higher Education by Diverse Issues in Higher Education.

• Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, Ph.D.  Chancellor, University of Massachusetts Boston
  Dr. Suárez-Orozco is a distinguished scholar in education, globalization, and migration, who arrived in the U.S. as a teenager after his parents bought a one-way ticket from Argentina to flee the terror and violence that the country was experiencing. Prior to coming to UMass Boston, he served as the inaugural UCLA Wasserman Dean UCLA’s Graduate School of Education & Information Studies.

2 More details and sources available here.
FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANT LEADERS WHO CAME TO THE U.S. AS INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

- **Neeli Bendapudi, Ph.D.** President, Penn State (Pennsylvania State University)
  Dr. Bendapudi received her bachelor’s degree and MBA at Andhra University in India, and arrived in the U.S. as an international student at the University of Kansas, where she received her doctoral degree in marketing. She has been recognized for her contributions to the field by *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, *Enterprising Women*, and *Louisville Business First*. The American Immigration Council also recognized her with its *Immigrant Achievement Award* in 2023.

- **Ángel Cabrera, Ph.D.** President, Georgia Tech (Georgia Institute of Technology)
  A former Fulbright scholar, Dr. Cabrera has been recognized as a 2017 Great Immigrant by the Carnegie Corporation. He received his master’s and doctoral degrees at Georgia Tech. Dr. Cabrera previously served as the president of George Mason University, and is the first native of Spain to lead an American institution.

- **Sonya Christian, Ph.D.** Chancellor, California Community Colleges
  Dr. Christian, who previously served as the President at Bakersfield College and Chancellor at Kern Community College District, grew up in Kerala, India. She received her master’s degree from the University of Southern California and her doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles.

- **Ron Daniels, JD; LLM** President, Johns Hopkins University
  Originally from Canada, Dr. Daniels holds his bachelor’s degree and JD from the University of Toronto. He arrived in the U.S. as an international student to pursue his LLM at Yale University. Dr. Daniels, a scholar in law and economics, has co-authored seven books and numerous scholarly articles exploring the intersections of law, economics, development, and public policy.

- **Raj Echambadi, Ph.D.** President, Illinois Institute of Technology
  Dr. Echambadi arrived in the U.S. from India as an international graduate student, and went on to receive his doctorate in marketing from the University of Houston. He now advocates for immigrant-origin, refugee, and international students and serves as co-chair of the Steering Committee for the Presidents’ Alliance.

- **Renu Khator, Ph.D.** Chancellor of the University of Houston System & President, University of Houston
  Originally from India, Dr. Khator arrived in the U.S. as an international student at Purdue University, where she earned her master’s and doctoral degrees in political science. Dr. Khator received the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award in 2014, the most prestigious honor granted to Indians abroad, and was recognized with the *Outstanding American by Choice Award* by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). She was the first Indian immigrant to lead a comprehensive research university in the U.S. and the first female chancellor of a Texas higher education system.
• **Peter Nwosu, Ph.D.**  
**President, State University of New York (SUNY) at Oswego**
Originally from Nigeria, Dr. Nwosu is an American Council on Education Fellow and Fulbright Scholar who came to the U.S. to pursue his MA at Towson University. In his welcome message to the SUNY Oswego Community, Nwosu shares his immigrant student background and being the first in his family to go to college.

• **Javier Reyes, Ph.D.**  
**Chancellor, University of Massachusetts Amherst**
Dr. Reyes was born and raised in Mexico, and after completing his undergraduate studies at Tecnológico de Monterrey (Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey), he received his doctorate in economics at Texas A&M University. He is the first UMass Amherst chancellor of Hispanic origin.

• **S. David Wu, Ph.D.**  
**President, Baruch College**
Dr. Wu arrived in the U.S. as an international student from Taiwan, pursuing master’s and doctoral degrees at Pennsylvania State University. He has previously held leadership roles at George Mason University and Lehigh University.

In April 2023, Drs. Eddinger, Reyes and Suárez-Orozco discussed their personal and professional journeys at an event titled, *Higher Ed Pathways to Immigration: Why it Matters*, and co-hosted by the University of Massachusetts Boston, the Presidents’ Alliance, the Edward M. Kennedy Institute, and the Immigration Initiative at Harvard University.

**SECOND-GENERATION IMMIGRANT LEADERS**

• **Abel Antonio Chávez, Ph.D.**  
**President, Our Lady of the Lake University**
Born to Mexican parents, Dr. Chávez became the first in his family to graduate from college. He has led various initiatives, including programs for Mexican students in collaboration with the Mexican federal government. He holds four degrees, including a Ph.D. in civil and environmental engineering from the University of Colorado Denver.

• **Martha Garcia, Ed.D.**  
**President/CEO, Mt. San Antonio College**
Born to farmworkers from Mexico, Dr. Garcia was the first in her family to attend college, launching her studies at a community college. She has led two institutions, Imperial Valley College as Superintendent/President, and most recently Mt. San Antonio College. Dr. Garcia holds a doctoral degree in educational leadership from San Diego State University.

• **Linda G. Mills, Ph.D.**  
**President, New York University**
Dr. Mills’ research stems from her family’s origins, including her great-grandmother’s murder by Nazis in Riga, as well as her Jewish mother who escaped from Vienna in the 1930s. She has produced acclaimed documentaries, premiering at both the Tribeca Film Festival and the Los Angeles Jewish Film Festival. Dr. Mills holds a doctoral degree in health policy from Brandeis University.
• **Madeline Pumariega  President, Miami Dade College**  
Born to Cuban parents who fled Cuba in the 1960s, Pumariega is the first female president to lead Miami Dade College, one of the largest educational institutions in the nation. She strives to ensure students have a path to advancing their economic mobility through education. Pumariega holds a master’s in educational leadership and administration, and has completed doctoral coursework in community college leadership at Barry University.

• **Frank Wu, JD  President, Queens College**  
Born to Chinese immigrants, Wu served a two-year term at the Committee of 100, a non-profit organization that is committed to promoting positive U.S.-China relations and encouraging the civic engagement of Chinese Americans. He holds a JD with honors from the University of Michigan.

**Impact of Immigrant-Origin Presidents and Chancellors: Why It Matters**

Immigrant-origin leaders shape a campus and the overall higher education landscape in numerous ways. They play a critical role in upholding the global character and appeal of U.S. institutions, and pave the way for future generations of international and immigrant-origin students in the United States. Those who are former international students embody the immigration pathway offered by higher education.

• **Fostering Academic Excellence**: Immigrant-origin leaders often possess extensive international academic and professional experience, which they leverage to foster academic excellence in their institutions. Their global outlook and familiarity with diverse educational systems enable them to introduce best practices and innovative pedagogical methods.

• **Promoting Diversity and Inclusion**: Leaders from diverse backgrounds bring a deep understanding of the importance of diversity and inclusion in higher education, including for faculty and staff. They often advocate for policies and initiatives that create inclusive campus environments and support underrepresented groups.

• **Enhancing Global Engagement**: Immigrant-origin university leaders strengthen international ties and collaborations, making American universities global hubs of knowledge and research. Their networks facilitate international partnerships, student exchanges, and collaborative research projects. As U.S. institutions look to deepen their internationalization efforts and to attract more international students, their foreign-born employees can be mobilized to serve as champions and advocates for such efforts.

• **Driving Innovation and Entrepreneurship**: The international perspective of immigrant-origin leaders often drives innovation and entrepreneurial ventures within universities. Their experiences in different cultural and economic contexts inspire new approaches to problem-solving and resource management. Indeed, first-generation immigrant presidents, as with immigrant entrepreneurs, can help spur investments in their home countries, foster transnational networks, and support brain circulation.
Navigating Complex Challenges: Immigrant-origin leaders bring strong problem-solving skills and resilience, often developed through navigating complex challenges in their home countries, or through theirs or their family’s experience of migration. These qualities are invaluable in leading large, multifaceted institutions through times of change and crisis.

Inspiring Future Generations: The presence of immigrant-origin leaders in American universities serves as an inspiration to students and faculty from diverse backgrounds, especially given that 36% of all U.S. postsecondary students are either international students or first- or second-generation immigrants. Students want to see faculty, administrators, and leaders who reflect their identity and lived experience. Immigrant-origin leaders can help diversify and transform U.S. colleges and universities, creating spaces for and mentoring students who also come from diverse communities and backgrounds, to contribute their knowledge and talent to advance higher education.

Champions of higher education and immigration: Inspired by their lived and professional experiences, immigrant-origin leaders are natural advocates for leveraging immigrant talent. They do this through engagement with local and national immigrant communities and issues, and also through advocating for higher education and immigration policy reform through organizations like the Presidents’ Alliance and others.

The contributions of immigrant-origin leaders to U.S. campuses are profound and multifaceted. Their influence extends beyond administrative leadership to shaping the academic, cultural, and global dimensions of their institutions. To fully leverage the power and influence of such faculty and leaders, we need to first and foremost understand the scale and scope of their presence; acknowledge their pathways and diversity of their journeys; and address the academic, cultural, and immigration-related barriers that might prevent them from fully realizing their positive impact. Our report offers an early window into the growing ranks of this important group of immigrants who are an essential part of the immigrant success story in America.