



IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Powering the future workforce and helping to drive excellence and innovation on our campuses, in our communities, and for our country

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PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE | ON HIGHER EDUCATION
AND IMMIGRATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the wake of the Supreme Court decision ending affirmative action on campuses in 2023, we have witnessed a proliferation of anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) legislation in states across the country, together with increased polarization of immigration as an electoral issue, and ongoing attacks on higher education's value and role. The impacts of these developments on students and their access to and through college are still unfolding. One group of students who are key to the future of higher education and may be especially affected are immigrant-origin students.

Immigration helps fuel the U.S. economy, fill job shortages, spur innovation, and bolster our country's demographic future. Likewise, American colleges and universities play a crucial role in educating and training future workforces, driving research and innovation across public and private sectors, enabling economic and social mobility for students

from all backgrounds, and unleashing students' skills and potential in science, technology, healthcare, business, education, social services, and more. Yet the significant impact of immigration on U.S. higher education is still not well understood.

This report analyzes the impact of immigrant-origin students on the higher education sector. Immigrant-origin students include *first-generation immigrants born abroad and second-generation immigrants*, U.S.-born children with one or more immigrant parents. These students are integral to the mission of higher education and to the future of our national economy.

Immigrant-origin students drive enrollment growth on campuses, help power the future-trained workforce and economy, increase diversity, and strengthen U.S. national security.

Immigrant-origin students are the fastest-growing group of students in higher education, driving over 90 percent of the domestic enrollment growth at U.S. colleges and universities from 2000 to 2022.

A Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau data commissioned by the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration shows that, **in 2022, immigrant-origin students accounted for 5.8 million or 32 percent of all students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities**, up from 20 percent in 2000.

The analysis does not include international students who enter the U.S. on non-immigrant visas (F, J, or M visas) in order to study at a U.S. college or university in the category of first-generation immigrant

students. Over the past decades, many international student alumni have pursued employment and other pathways in the U.S. post-graduation, launching careers, starting families, and transitioning to being first-generation immigrants. Their children are among the growing group of second-generation immigrant-origin students.

When the Presidents' Alliance first commissioned this research five years ago, immigrant-origin students accounted for 28 percent of all enrolled students in higher education and had driven 58 percent of domestic enrollments from 2000 to 2018. The accelerated impact of immigrant-origin students between 2018 and 2022 reflects the robust immigration trends of previous decades: this group has grown faster than the population of U.S.-born students with U.S.-born parents (*considered third-generation or higher*).

The growth, experiences, and prospects of the immigrant-origin student population intersect with four crucial policy areas:

- **Federal immigration policy and immigration flows.** Federal immigration policies impact students and campuses in the short and long term. For example, federal immigration reform is stalled in Congress, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is under grave threat in the courts, and immigration is once again being leveraged as a wedge issue in elections. These developments adversely impact a sizable proportion of non-citizen first-generation immigrant students, who account for nearly 50 percent of the 1.9 million first-generation immigrant students in higher education.
- **State goals to promote postsecondary attainment and support workforce development.** Immigrant-origin students make up an increasing share of higher education enrollment in states across the U.S. In many states, policymakers, advocates, and higher education leaders need to attract and support immigrant-origin students in order to meet state-specific goals related to postsecondary attainment and workforce development. **In 2022, immigrant-origin students made up 1 in 5 students (about 20 percent or more) in 23 states and the District of Columbia**, up from 18 states and D.C. in 2018. Supporting progress toward state goals means understanding how and to what extent first-generation immigrant students residing in the state are able to access

in-state tuition, state financial aid, professional and occupational licensure, and driver's licenses. Such resources can attract immigrant adult learners to pursue postsecondary credentials and also facilitate support for second-generation immigrant students and their families.

- ➔ **Institutional inclusion and social and economic mobility efforts.** As immigrant-origin students drive enrollment growth on campuses, they also generate increased diversity within the student body. **In 2022, over 80 percent of all immigrant-origin students identified as students of color, compared to approximately 30 percent of all U.S.-born students of U.S.-born parents.** In the wake of the 2023 Supreme Court decision ending affirmative action and the proliferation of anti-DEI legislation in states, institutions need to seek alternative ways to ensure access to and success through college for students of diverse backgrounds, including immigrant-origin students.
- ➔ **National innovation and security imperatives.** Immigrant-origin students and alumni conduct essential research and fill critical workforce needs in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). In 2022, a third (33 percent) of all first-generation immigrant students in higher education were enrolled in graduate or professional school, compared to 16 percent of all second-generation immigrant students and 19 percent of all U.S.-born students whose parents were born in the U.S.

U.S. higher education, local and state communities, and our national economy need the talents, determination, and innovative contributions of all student groups. Investing in immigrant-origin students will help colleges and universities meet the demographic challenges confronting campuses across the country and bolster workforce development and postsecondary attainment.

Gaining a better understanding of immigrant-origin students' pathways to and through higher education is important for policymakers, higher education leaders, and researchers. Immigrant-origin students may face distinctive challenges as they navigate their educational journey, including immigration policies at the state and national levels, language barriers, and a sense of belonging on college campuses. At the same time, they bring diverse experiences and perspectives to campuses and workforce environments. Focusing on immigrant-origin students sheds light on how we mitigate the impacts of adverse national trends on students, ensure the future sustainability and viability of the higher education sector, grow the trained workforce, strengthen our nation's resilience and security, and promote economic prosperity nationwide.



INTRODUCTION

Approximately 18 million students were enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities in 2022.¹ While this figure represents a rebound since the enrollment drops experienced by campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic, the higher education sector is bracing for future declines in postsecondary enrollment due to declining birth rates, slowing population growth, as well as concerns about the value of a college degree and degree affordability.² Without the enrollment of immigrant-origin students, the demographic challenges facing colleges and universities would be far more severe.

The impact of immigration on U.S. population growth, postsecondary enrollments, workforce development, and the labor market is significant, and changes in immigration flows have short- and long-term impacts. In February 2024, the [Congressional Budget Office](#) reported that increased immigration to the U.S. since the pandemic boosted the U.S.

labor force and population growth enough for it to revise its economic forecasts significantly upward, estimating higher GDP and greater revenues in the years to come.³

This stands in stark contrast to analyses of [U.S. Census Bureau](#) data released in February 2020 that showed a decline in immigration flows amid the proliferation of policies aimed at reducing immigration.⁴ Demographer William Frey predicted a stagnant labor force, slower national economic growth, and a decline in the size of the younger population in the U.S.⁵ The reduction of net immigration in the U.S. from 2018 to 2021, due both to the harsh immigration policies of the previous administration and the pandemic, means that its enrollment consequences will be felt on campuses in the years to come.⁶ Robust immigration not only spurs economic growth and innovation, but also drives enrollments and unleashes talent for U.S. higher education.

BOX 1**Defining the Study Population**

This analysis describes the profile of adults ages 18 to 54 who have at least a high school diploma or equivalent and who were enrolled in college or university at the time of the U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey (CPS). The analysis breaks this population down by immigrant generation:

■ First Generation

First-generation immigrants are domestic residents with no U.S. citizenship at birth. They include naturalized U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, resettled refugees, asylees and asylum seekers, dependents of temporary visa holders, and undocumented individuals, with and without Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), recipients of Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

■ Second Generation

This generation, also referred to as U.S.-born children of immigrants, is composed of persons born in the United States to one or more immigrant parents.

■ Third or Higher Generation

Members of this generation were born in the United States to only U.S.-born parents.

The first and second generations, together, make up what this report refers to as the “immigrant-origin students.”

While international students on non-immigrant visas (e.g. F, J, M visas) are often included in estimates of the first-generation immigrant population, they are excluded from this analysis because (1) they are not part of the domestic student population on college campuses, and (2) though they may be “prospective” immigrants to the U.S., these students have come to the U.S. expressly for the purposes of an education. (See the Appendix for details on estimating the number of “domestic” higher education students.)

As immigrant-origin students now make up close to one-third of all students in higher education, it is imperative to better understand the scope and demographics of this student population, including population growth over time, citizenship status, ethnic and racial diversity, and enrollment trends. In this study, we also examine enrollment along three axes: institutional type, program level, and state residence. Box 1 provides an explanation of the immigration generation categories used in this report.



DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS

Population Size and Growth over Time

Immigrant-origin students make up a growing share of all students in higher education.

In 2022, immigrant-origin students constituted close to 5.9 million (or 32 percent) of the approximately 18 million students enrolled in higher education.

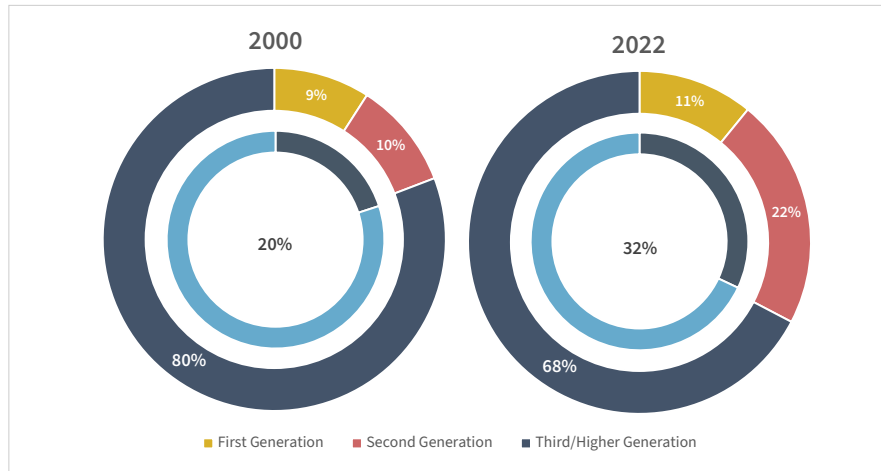
In 2022, first-generation immigrant students numbered 1.9 million or 11 percent of all students, representing a 41 percent increase from 2000, while second-generation immigrant students numbered over 3.9 million in 2022 or nearly 22 percent of all students, representing a 156 percent increase from 2000 (see Figure 2).

The population of second-generation immigrant students is both larger and has grown at a faster rate than that of first-generation immigrant students, while the immigrant-origin student population as a whole has grown at a faster rate than the population of students in the third generation or higher.

This represents a 102 percent increase from 2000, when immigrant-origin students constituted 2.9 million (or about 20 percent) of the 14.8 million students enrolled in higher education (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Immigrant-Origin Share of Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, 2000 and 2022



SOURCE:

Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) October 2000 and October 2022 Educational Supplement.

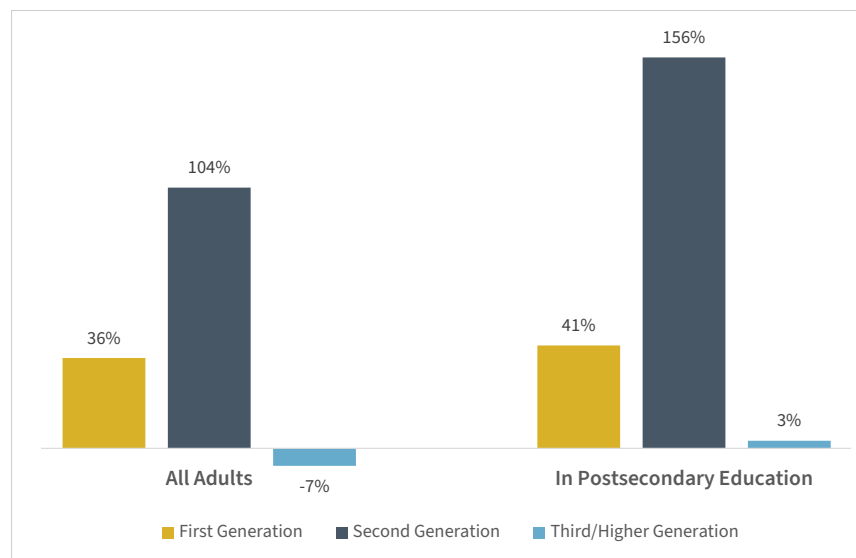
NOTE:

Due to rounding, the shares shown for different subpopulations may not add up to the share shown for the overall population (e.g., first- and second-generation individuals compared to all immigrant-origin individuals).



FIGURE 2

Population Change between 2000 and 2022: All Adults and Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, by Immigrant Generation



SOURCE:

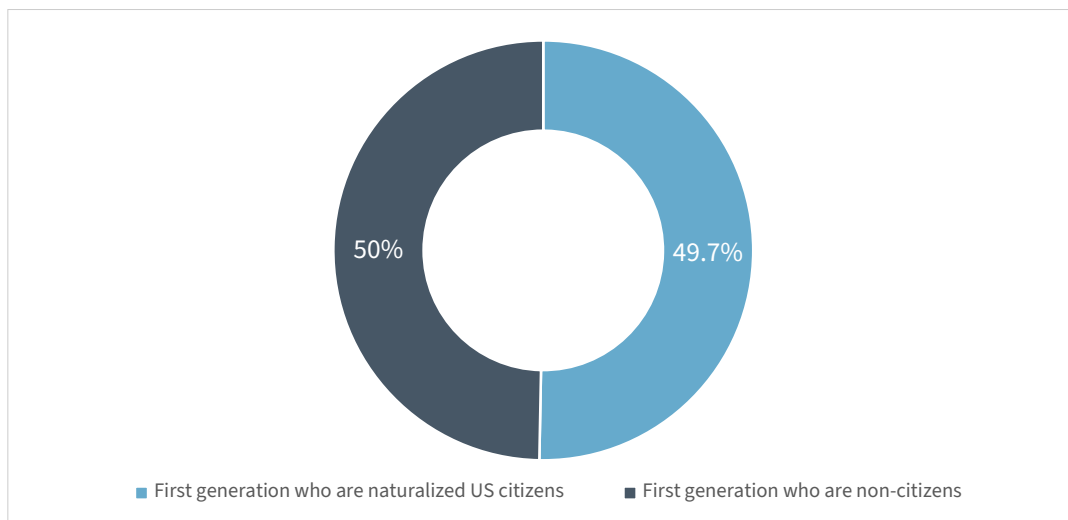
MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2022 Educational Supplement.

Citizenship Status

The population of 1.9 million first-generation immigrant students is evenly split between naturalized citizens and non-citizens (see Figure 3). The non-citizens reflect a wide range of immigration statuses, including legal permanent residents, resettled refugees, asylees and asylum seekers, undocumented immigrants with and without Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), dependents of temporary visa holders, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) holders, stateless individuals, and others. Non-citizen students, especially those in temporary or precarious immigration statuses, face different barriers and opportunities depending on their specific status, the state in which they reside, and the institution they attend.

FIGURE 3

Citizenship status of first-generation immigrant students, share of U.S. naturalized citizens and noncitizens



SOURCE:

MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2022 Educational Supplement.

It is noteworthy that the **proportion of naturalized citizens among first-generation students increased from 45 percent in 2021 to just over 50 percent in 2022**. The increase may be reflective of the higher rates and volume of naturalizations since early 2021. Supporting immigrant integration and naturalization has been a priority under the Biden [administration](#).

Race and Ethnicity

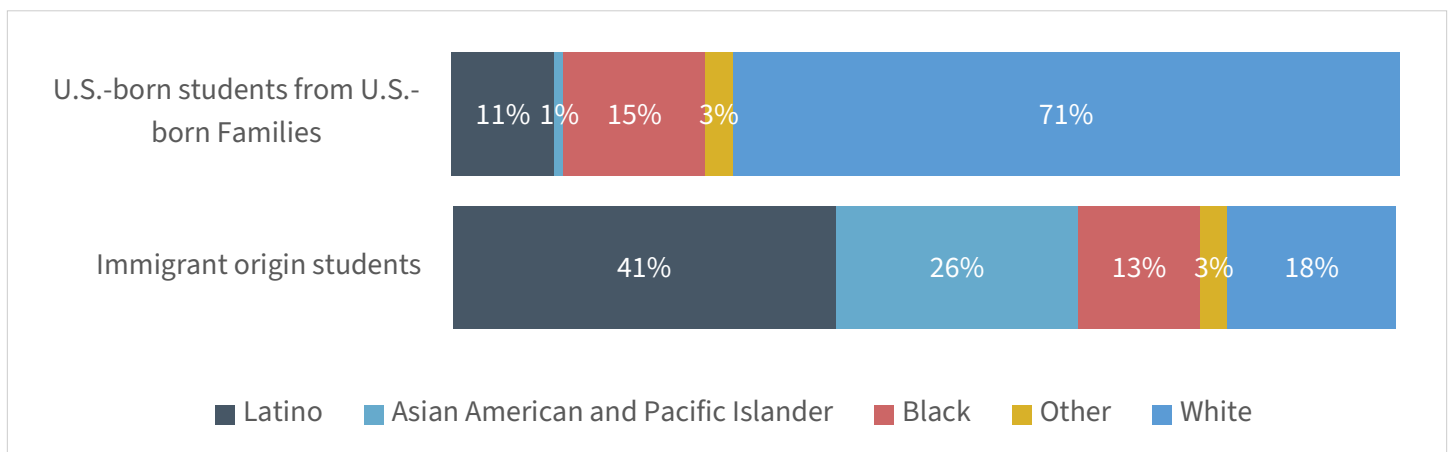
Immigrant-origin students are incredibly diverse and have helped drive greater diversity on campuses.

Overall, Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), Black, and Latino students from immigrant families account for 80 percent of all immigrant-origin students enrolled on campuses. In contrast, AAPI, African-American or Black, and Latino students account for less than 30 percent of all students born in the U.S. whose parents were also born in the U.S. (see Figure 4).

In considering the impact of immigration, this means that immigrant-origin AAPI, Black, and Latino students account for 60 percent of all students of color enrolled in higher education.

FIGURE 4

Racial and Ethnic Composition of Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, by Immigrant Origin, 2022



SOURCE:

MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2022 Educational Supplement.

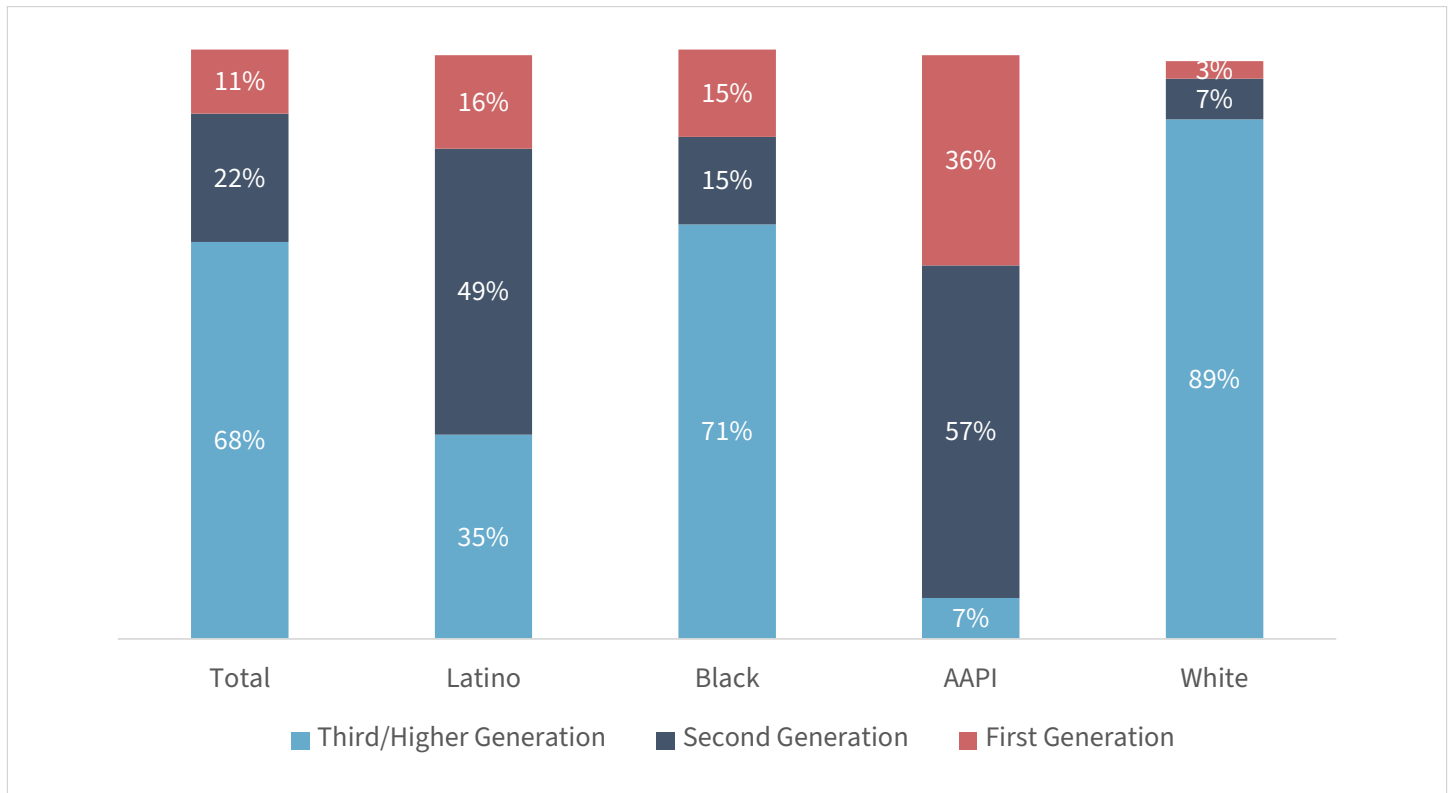
There are striking differences within and among the different student populations, as shown in Figure 5.

- **Of the 1.6 million Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students enrolled in higher education, the overwhelming majority, or 94 percent, are of immigrant-origin**, including over 36 percent who are first-generation immigrants and 57 percent who are U.S.-born children of immigrants.

- ➔ **Of the 2.5 million Black students in higher education, 29 percent are of immigrant origin**, including slightly more than 15 percent who are first-generation immigrants and slightly less than 15 percent who are U.S.-born children of immigrants.
- ➔ **Of the 3.7 million Latino students, 66 percent are of immigrant origin**, with the U.S.-born children of immigrants accounting for 49 percent while 16 percent are first-generation immigrants.
- ➔ In contrast, **immigrant-origin students accounted for only 11 percent of the 9.7 million White students enrolled in higher education**, including 3 percent who are first-generation immigrants.

FIGURE 5

Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, by Race/Ethnicity and Immigrant Generation, 2022



SOURCE:

MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2022 Educational Supplement.

These trends are consistent with the overall direction of the workforce and the population within the U.S., as our national and regional demographics continue to grow more diverse than ever. Diversity on campus helps drive excellence and equips students to thrive in an interconnected world. Exposure to diverse cultures and backgrounds prepares all students to work more effectively in groups and contribute to institutional, cultural, and institutional change.⁷ Not only are immigrant-origin students sustaining and driving enrollment on campuses, but the diverse perspectives and backgrounds they bring also enrich the learning environment for all students.



ENROLLMENT CHARACTERISTICS

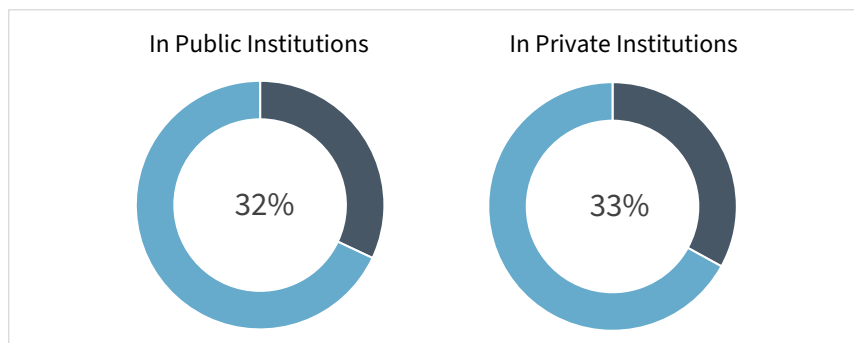
Enrollment in Public and Private Institutions

The overwhelming majority (82 percent) of all students enrolled in U.S. higher education, regardless of immigrant generation, attend public colleges and universities, which are often anchor institutions in their communities, key employers in their state, and generators of social and economic mobility.

Immigrant-origin students make up 32 percent of all students at public colleges and universities and 33 percent of all students in private institutions (see Figure 6). In contrast, in 2018, immigrant-origin students accounted for 29 percent of all students in public institutions and 25 percent in private institutions.⁸

FIGURE 6

Immigrant-Origin Share of All Students Enrolled in Public and Private Institutions of Higher Education, 2022



SOURCE: MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2022 Educational Supplement.

With growing concerns about the demographic cliff confronting higher education, campus commitments to diversity, and higher education costs,⁹ private colleges and universities may see immigrant-origin students as a prime student group to which admissions offices may dedicate time and resources.

Even as the majority of immigrant-origin students attend public institutions following the same pattern as all students, a slightly higher percentage of first-generation immigrant students attend private institutions than the U.S.-born children of immigrants, which can be due to affordability, cost, and other reasons. Private institutions can have more freedom in providing financial scholarships and other incentives to intentionally create inclusive resources on their campuses for immigrant students. These resources can foster a sense of welcome and belonging on campuses for immigrant-origin students, leading to more successful recruitment efforts.

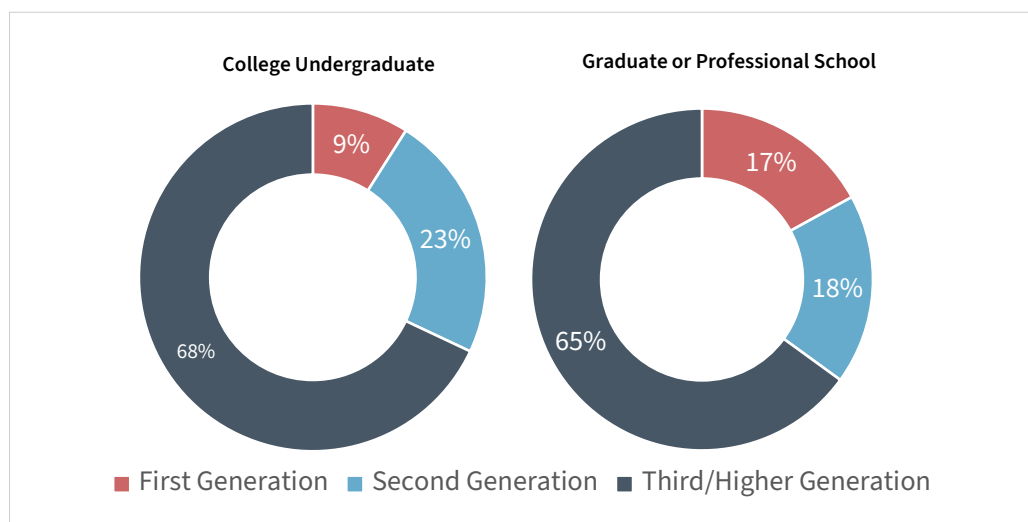
Undergraduate and Graduate Enrollments

While four out of five of all students are enrolled at the undergraduate level, there are significant variations in enrollment at the graduate and professional levels among first- and second-generation immigrant students, and the contrasts with U.S.-born students whose parents were also born in the U.S. are noteworthy.

In 2022, immigrant-origin students accounted for 32 percent of all students enrolled in undergraduate institutions and 35 percent of all students enrolled in graduate or professional schools (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7

Share of Enrolled Postsecondary Students by Program Level and Immigrant Generation, 2022



SOURCE: MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2022 Educational Supplement.

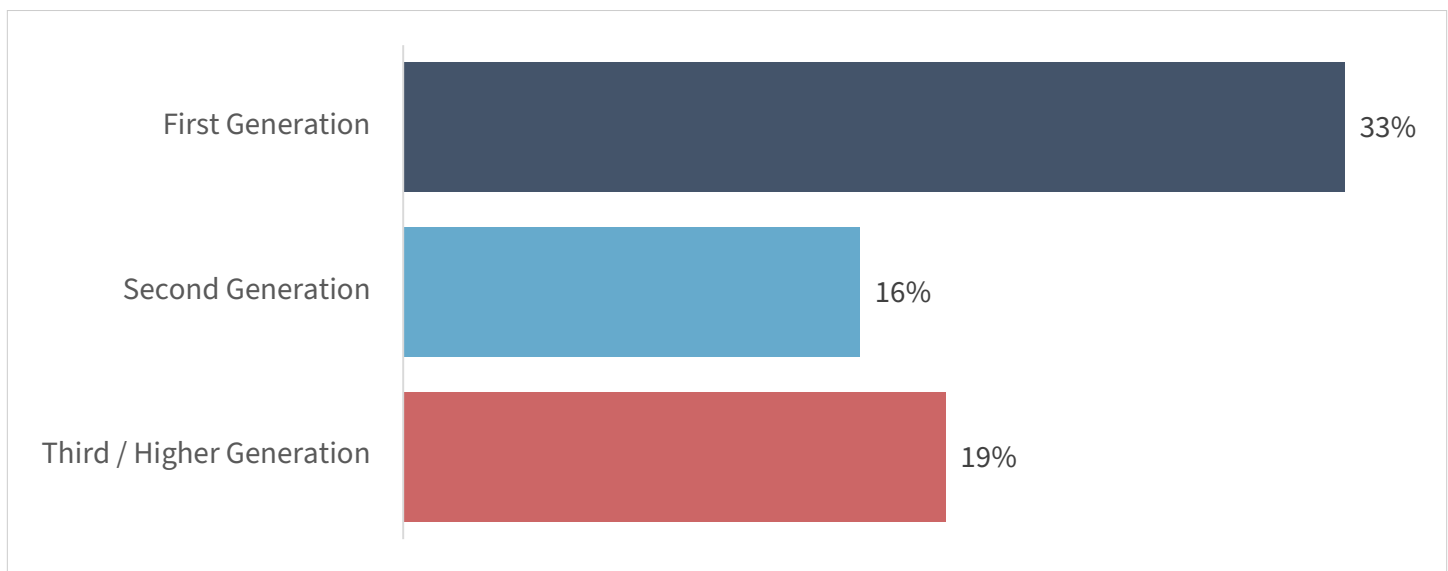
Among first-generation immigrant students, 33 percent were enrolled at the graduate level, compared with 16 percent of second-generation immigrant students and 19 percent of students of the third-generation or higher (see Figure 8).

The diversity of immigrant-origin students at the graduate levels and the contrast between undergraduate and graduate enrollment is also noticeable.

- **Latino first-** and second-generation immigrant students made up 67 percent of all Latino students enrolled in graduate or professional school.
- **Black first-** and second-generation immigrant students made up 42 percent of all Black students enrolled in graduate or professional school.
- **AAPI first-** and second-generation immigrant students made up 97 percent of all AAPI students enrolled in graduate or professional school.
- **White first-** and second-generation immigrant students made up 11 percent percent of all White students enrolled in graduate or professional school.

FIGURE 8

Share of Postsecondary Students Enrolled in Graduate-Level Programs, by Immigrant Generation, 2022



SOURCE:

MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2022 Educational Supplement.

The variations among these student populations are reflected in the overall distribution of immigrant-origin students across undergraduate and graduate programs (see table 1).

- **Latino first-** and second-generation students account for 27 percent of all immigrant-origin students at the graduate level compared with 45 percent at the undergraduate level in 2022.
- **Black first-** and second-generation students account for 17 percent of all immigrant-origin students at the graduate level compared with 11 percent at the undergraduate level.
- **AAPI first-** and second-generation students account for 36 percent of all immigrant-origin students at the graduate level compared with 22 percent at the undergraduate level.

TABLE 1

Undergraduate and Graduate Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education by Race/Ethnicity and Immigrant Generation, 2022

All Students	Undergraduate					Graduate				
	Total Enrolled Students	All Immigrant-Origin	First-Generation	Second-Generation	Third/Higher Generation	Total Enrolled Students	All Immigrant-Origin	First-Generation	Second-Generation	Third/Higher Generation
Total	14,416,000	100%	100%	100%	100%	3,642,000	100%	100%	100%	100%
Latino	3,198,000	45%	39%	48%	11%	510,000	27%	16%	36%	7%
Black	1,983,000	11%	16%	10%	15%	524,000	17%	28%	8%	13%
Asian American and Pacific Islander	1,108,000	22%	25%	21%	1%	477,000	36%	39%	34%	1%
White	7,678,000	18%	19%	18%	70%	2,032,000	17%	14%	20%	75%
Other	449,000	3%	0%	4%	3%	97,000	2%	2%	2%	3%

SOURCE:

MPI analysis of data from the CPS October 2022 Educational Supplement.

These enrollment patterns point to opportunities for colleges and universities to recruit talented students from a diversity of backgrounds and highlight areas that may need greater resources to effectively serve an increasingly diverse student population. Institutions must be equipped to work with all students, including immigrant-origin students, and to recognize the diversity within student populations. Furthermore, higher education institutions will want to consider where immigrant-origin students live and go to school, as those numbers can inform recruitment and other initiatives. State policies impacting access and affordability for immigrant students and for those from immigrant families may further affect enrollment behavior for immigrant-origin students.



TOP STATES WITH IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS

Immigrant-Origin Students in Postsecondary Education: Enrollment and Share by State

While immigrant-origin students are more highly concentrated in states with higher immigrant populations, many states across the country have seen increases in the total number and proportion of immigrant-origin students.

In 2022, immigrant-origin students made up 32 percent of postsecondary enrollment in the U.S. as a whole. However, these students accounted for 40 percent or more of enrolled students in six states (California, New York, Florida, New Jersey, Minnesota,

and Nevada). In seven states, the immigrant-origin share of all students ranged between 30 and 40 percent (Texas, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, Arizona, Washington, and Hawaii). In 10 states, it ranged between 20 and 30 percent (Virginia, Michigan, Georgia, Connecticut, Vermont, Oregon, Nebraska, New Mexico, Rhode Island, and Delaware). In 2022, immigrant-origin students accounted for at least one-fifth of the enrolled student population in 23 states and the District of Columbia, up from 18 states and the District of Columbia in 2018 (see table 2).

TABLE 2

Number of Immigrant-Origin Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education and Their Share of All Students, Selected States,* 2018 and 2022

Immigrant-Origin Students					
	2018			2022	
	Number	Share of All Students		Number	Share of All Students
United States	5,316,000	28%	United States	5,862,000	32%
California	1,352,000	50%	California	1,537,000	57%
Hawaii	28,000	40%	New York	531,000	47%
Nevada	65,000	40%	Florida	451,000	44%
Florida	487,000	40%	Nevada	63,000	42%
New York	488,000	39%	New Jersey	226,000	41%
New Jersey	215,000	36%	Minnesota	121,000	40%
Massachusetts	143,000	34%	Texas	653,000	39%
District of Columbia	14,000	33%	Maryland	158,000	39%
Washington	122,000	32%	Massachusetts	169,000	38%
Texas	559,000	32%	Hawaii	22,000	36%
Connecticut	52,000	29%	Illinois	288,000	36%
Arizona	112,000	27%	Washington	119,000	35%
Rhode Island	18,000	27%	Arizona	133,000	34%
Maryland	111,000	27%	Virginia	147,000	29%
Virginia	124,000	27%	District of Columbia	12,000	29%
Illinois	214,000	26%	Connecticut	52,000	27%
Oregon	56,000	25%	Michigan	137,000	26%
Delaware	13,000	24%	Rhode Island	15,000	24%
Alaska	8,000	22%	Oregon	39,000	23%
			Delaware	11,000	22%
			New Mexico	24,000	22%
			Georgia	129,000	21%
			Nebraska	21,000	20%
			Utah	43,000	20%

*The states included in this table are those with at least 20% immigrant-origin share of total enrolled students.

SOURCE:

MPI analysis of monthly data (January to December) from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2022 Current Population Survey (CPS).

Among the top enrolling states, 15 enrolled at least 100,000 immigrant-origin students in 2022 (in descending order: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Maryland, Virginia, Michigan, Arizona, Georgia, Minnesota, Washington, and Pennsylvania). Overall, 33 states enrolled more than 20,000 immigrant-origin students in their state’s higher education institutions (see table 3).

TABLE 3

Number of Immigrant-Origin Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Education and Their Share of All Students, Selected States,* 2022

Immigrant-Origin Students					
	Number	Share of All Students		Number	Share of All Students
United States	5,862,000	32%	Oregon	39,000	23%
California	1,537,000	57%	New Mexico	24,000	22%
New York	531,000	47%	Georgia	129,000	21%
Florida	451,000	44%	Nebraska	21,000	20%
Nevada	63,000	42%	Utah	43,000	20%
New Jersey	226,000	41%	Oklahoma	30,000	19%
Minnesota	121,000	40%	Wisconsin	53,000	18%
Texas	653,000	39%	Indiana	47,000	16%
Maryland	158,000	39%	Pennsylvania	112,000	16%
Massachusetts	169,000	38%	Tennessee	50,000	16%
Hawaii	22,000	36%	Kansas	25,000	16%
Illinois	288,000	36%	Ohio	94,000	16%
Washington	119,000	35%	Colorado	48,000	15%
Arizona	133,000	34%	North Carolina	82,000	15%
Virginia	147,000	29%	Kentucky	31,000	13%
Connecticut	52,000	27%	South Carolina	30,000	12%
Michigan	137,000	26%	Missouri	25,000	9%

*The states included in this table are those with at least 20,000 immigrant-origin students.

SOURCE:

MPI analysis of monthly data (January to December) from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2022 Current Population Survey (CPS).

While debates over the return on investment and value of a postsecondary degree continue, research demonstrates that obtaining a higher education degree positively impacts economic earnings and employment.¹⁰ The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2023 the median weekly income of individuals with a bachelor's degree earned 40 percent more than individuals with a high school diploma, \$1,493 and \$899, respectively.¹¹ Additionally, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), a professional association that collects and disseminates research related to the employment of college graduates, found that over 70 percent of employers surveyed view tertiary qualifications as high-quality.¹²

In light of all these trends, higher education leaders, advocates, and state policy-makers should devote attention to the recruitment and retention of immigrant-origin students, both traditional age and adult learners. For leaders seeking to upskill the existing workforce, promote higher economic outcomes, and ensure workforce development, increasing the number of residents who obtain a postsecondary credential is critical.

Immigrant-origin students help power student enrollment, spur workforce development, and contribute to economic prosperity in the states where they reside and pursue postsecondary education.

The contributions of immigrant-origin students on campus and beyond make understanding how state and federal policies can impact their higher education access, student success, and postgraduate prospects all the more important.

State Policy Impacts

Immigrant-origin student enrollment and retention can be shaped by policies that impact the overall living and educational access environment for the state's non-citizen students, especially those who are in precarious immigration statuses or more recent arrivals. As noted above, nearly half of first-generation immigrant students are non-citizens. This includes approximately 408,000 undocumented immigrant students who account for approximately 21 percent of the 1.9 million first-generation immigrant students in higher education.

The top five states enrolling immigrant-origin students all currently provide access to in-state tuition and financial aid to undocumented students.

The [Higher Ed Immigration Portal](#) (Portal) classifies all five of these states as either “Accessible” or “Comprehensive Access” in terms of their tuition and financial aid policies, meaning all these states provide statewide access to in-state tuition for the state’s undocumented students, including those with and without DACA, and may also provide some state financial aid or scholarships for undocumented students.

While refugee and asylee students are considered eligible non-citizens for federal financial aid, their early eligibility and access to in-state tuition and financial aid can also depend on their state of residence. As detailed on the Portal, [only some states](#) provide access to in-state tuition and state financial aid in the first year to these students.¹³ Moreover, [access to knowledgeable and supportive counselors who understand students’ higher education options and the obstacles they might face can facilitate the enrollment of non-citizen immigrant students](#). Providing comprehensive training to counselors working with undocumented, refugee, asylee and other non-immigrant student populations could affect the rates at which they enroll in higher education programs across states. In Kentucky, an innovative scholarship program was passed by the state legislature to support refugees, asylees, asylum seekers, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) recipients, and those in the U.S. through humanitarian parole. The program included technical assistance and a community of practice for campuses participating in the program.

In recent years, states and advocates have pursued initiatives to incentivize more students to enroll in postsecondary education, including College Promise programs, or to reconnect students who “stopped out” part way through their education. Ensuring that such programs’ eligibility criteria include all state residents regardless of immigration status, such as was implemented in New Mexico, Massachusetts, and elsewhere, increases the reach and impact of these programs.¹⁴

Reducing the indirect barriers to educational access and success is just as important. Access to driver’s licenses and forms of state assistance, for example, can enable students to attend college and provide them and their families with crucial safety nets to stay enrolled in higher education. Likewise, [states](#) that provide access to occupational and professional licensure regardless of immigration status support the increased enrollment among all first-generation immigrant students. For state policy-makers and higher education leaders, understanding these multiple angles of potential impact on immigrant-origin students and their families is increasingly important as they seek to boost workforce development and fill labor shortages in their states.

Impact of Anti-DEI Legislation

Conversely, state and federal policies that target immigrant populations or other immigrant-inclusive policies or that require the elimination of DEI programs can have chilling effects on immigrant-origin student enrollment. In some cases, institutions may mistakenly conclude that support for immigrant-origin students must be eliminated along with DEI programs, such as when the University of Texas, Austin [took the step](#) of eliminating a support program for Dreamers in response to legislation passed in Texas.

While immigration generation or status is not specifically mentioned in anti-DEI legislation, immigrant-origin students are more likely to be students of color and therefore to benefit from the support provided by such programs. Institutions need to monitor and mitigate the chilling effects of federal court decisions, including the 2023 Supreme Court decision ending affirmative action, and unfriendly state policies, such as those targeting diversity and inclusion efforts.

Federal Policy Impacts and National Imperatives

As discussed above, colleges and universities have a continuing role to play in supporting students in temporary and precarious immigration statuses.

Without federal immigration reform, undocumented students and those in temporary immigration statuses will continue to face barriers to accessing higher education, obtaining financial assistance, gaining work authorization, and accessing professional and occupational licensure. Institutions also have the opportunity to support the naturalization of eligible campus community members, which strengthens civic, economic, and social integration.

Second-generation immigrant students can be directly and indirectly impacted by federal immigration policy, as evidenced during the rollout of the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in 2024. Citizen students from mixed-status families experienced and continue to experience far more obstacles than other students this year in submitting their applications, including many students who found themselves barred from submitting the FAFSA for the first few months of the new rollout.¹⁵ While higher education leaders, researchers and advocates have expressed deep concern about the consequences of the obstacle-ridden rollout of the new FAFSA for all students, the effects on these immigrant-origin students were the most severe, likely leading to a drop in college enrollment and retention for this student population in the coming year.

Strengthening our Economic Resilience and National Security

Investing in the academic access, campus retention, and post-graduate success of immigrant-origin students supports institutional, local, regional, and national priorities.

According to a 2022 Bipartisan Policy Center report, first-generation immigrant entrepreneurs are about 80 percent more likely to start a business when compared to U.S.-born citizens.¹⁶ As of 2023, immigrants had won 40 percent of Nobel prizes awarded to Americans, while nearly 45 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants.¹⁷ **Supporting higher education pathways and entry into the workforce for both domestic students, including immigrant-origin students, and international students, is key to realizing our national technology and security priorities,** as expressed in the bipartisan [CHIPS and Science Act of 2022](#) and the 2023 [Executive Order on Artificial Intelligence](#) (AI).

The United States is facing labor shortages across several sectors, including those critical to national security. Military enlistment consistently falls short of national benchmarks, in part due to a dearth of qualified applicants. Undocumented students – who grow up in the United States and graduate from American high schools, colleges, and universities – are barred from military and public service due to their immigration status. Providing these students with a pathway to work authorization and relief from deportation would allow them to apply their skills in these and other professions, enhancing our nation’s security and strengthening our international standing.

In June 2024, the Biden-Harris administration announced an executive order to facilitate access to D-3 waivers, which can help eligible U.S. college and university graduates, including DACA recipients and other Dreamers, access employment-based visas. The implementation of this executive action could have a significant positive impact on the prospects for undocumented immigrant graduates, with and without DACA.¹⁸

Meanwhile, addressing green card backlogs and reinstating programs like the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MANVI) program – which helped facilitate enlistment pathways for immigrants with critical skills – could help address current recruiting shortfalls and ensure that the U.S. military can avail itself of the nation’s diverse talent. Defense companies, semiconductor facilities, and other industries central to the country’s strategic interests are facing growing employment deficits, reducing capacity to meet the talent goals enumerated in the Biden administration’s CHIPS and Science Act.¹⁹ Immigrants are well poised to drive American innovation if they are given the training and opportunities to fill these positions. It is worth noting here that as prospective immigrants, international students represent another potential source of immigrant-origin talent, and supporting their immigration pathways through U.S. higher education will help bolster the country’s ability to benefit from their contributions and strengthen our national security.



CONCLUSION

This report has explored the scope, demographic characteristics, and enrollment trends of the immigrant-origin student population in higher education. Making up 32 percent of all enrolled students, immigrant-origin students already constitute a significant group in higher education. These students' talents and determination contribute to our campuses and communities, as well as our national economy and security. As the fastest-growing student population, they also represent a crucial group to understand and support in the future. Various federal, state, and institutional policies impact the experiences and prospects of immigrant-origin students, including their enrollment access, success on campus, and eligibility for postgraduate employment. Understanding the needs of immigrant-origin students can provide critical insights to higher education leaders, policy-makers, advocates, and researchers. Supporting immigrant-origin students goes from recruitment through their post-graduate pathways. As college and university leaders develop strategies to attract, support, retain, and graduate immigrant-origin students, they need to find avenues to mitigate harmful policy impacts, fill and train the future workforce, and advance forward-looking practices on campus and beyond.



APPENDIX. DATA AND METHODS

The central data source for this analysis is the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS) October Supplement. This supplement collects detailed data on school enrollment and educational attainment, including respondents’ level of college enrollment and enrollment in private versus public schools, in addition to other sociodemographic and economic characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, U.S. citizenship status, and the place of birth of respondents and their parents). The CPS has a nationally representative sample of about 60,000 households. Trends over time are examined by comparing 2000 and 2022 October CPS data. The data and analysis by state are based on monthly CPS 2022 data averaged across the year to boost the sample size and thus provide a greater degree of accuracy when describing smaller populations. CPS estimates were somewhat lower than what the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported for postsecondary enrollment in Fall 2000 and 2022.²⁰ To account for these differences, CPS-based estimates were adjusted to match the official enrollment data from NCES.

Estimating “Domestic” Students

Because the goal of this study was to construct a profile of immigrant-origin students who are in the United States for more than just to study, it was necessary to exclude international students from these calculations. To do so, this analysis used two additional data sources to estimate the number of international students, and then to subtract them from the population of first-generation immigrant students. To estimate the size of the domestic student population in 2000, the Migration Policy Institute researcher first calculated the international student share of all enrolled U.S. students (excluding those on Optional Practical Training), based on data reported by the Institute of International Education.²¹ This international student share of all students (3.4 percent) was then used to estimate the absolute number of international students among all enrolled students according to October 2000 CPS data (i.e., 3.4 percent of 15.3 million students, or 528,000). Finally, the researcher subtracted this number from the number of first-generation immigrant students, according to October 2000 CPS data, to calculate the number of immigrant students who were not international students (close to 1.4 million). A similar approach was used to estimate the size of the international student population in 2022, except that the researcher used the share of international students from estimates provided by the American Immigration Council (AIC). The researcher estimated that about 1.9 million students were immigrants but not on student visas in 2022. Further, the researcher used AIC data on the share of international students by race/ethnicity, state of residence, enrollment in public and private institutions, and levels of enrollment to estimate the number of “domestic” students by these characteristics.

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ABOUT THE PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE

[The Presidents' Alliance](#) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan alliance of more than 550 American college and university leaders that brings college and university leaders and institutions together on the immigration issues that impact our students, campuses, and communities. As the only national organization exclusively focused on the intersection of higher education and immigration, we work to support immigrant, international, and refugee students, advance forward-looking immigration policies and practices at the federal, state, and campus levels, and provide our members resources, effective practices, and opportunities to engage.





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