

# **Factors Affecting the Retention of Immigrants at Public Four-Year Higher Education Institutions**

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## **Abstract**

This paper uses data from the 1996 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01) to construct and test a model of one-year retention for immigrants who began their higher education careers at public four year higher education institutions in 1996. It examines the differences in relationships of certain characteristics and behaviors such as SAT scores, socioeconomic factors, and student integration (using living situation with family vs. on campus as a proxy) to one year retention to the same institution for immigrants compared to native U.S. born students.

## **Introduction**

In the United States, the numbers of persons who are foreign born or who speak a language other than English in the home are large, have been growing, and now make up a significant portion of the U.S. population. In 1970, only about 4.7% of the total U.S. population was foreign born. That grew to 6.2% in 1980, 7.9% in 1990, and 10.4% in 2000. Recently, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that in 2006, one of every eight U.S. residents was foreign born. The foreign born population has increased from 9.6 million in 1970 to 37.5 million in 2006, an increase of just about 290%. In 2006, about 3.6 million immigrants were in the traditional college-going age group of 18-24 (Gibson and Lennon, 1999; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, 2007a, 2007b).

In 1997, Alba and Nee wrote that, “Just a handful of states and metropolitan areas receive a majority of new immigrants and remain the primary areas of residence and

work for immigrants and their children” (p. 857). That was true, in that the larger states had large immigrant populations. However, it seems somewhat limiting to think of immigrants as being spatially concentrated purely because of large numbers in particular states. Rhode Island will never have as many immigrants as California, but in 2006, more than one of every eight Rhode Island residents was foreign born, and that is certainly a significant part of the population. By 2006, the foreign born made up at least 10% of the populations of the five most populous states. Three states had more than 20% foreign born residents; including the most populous, California with 27.2%, the third most populous, New York with 21.6%, and the eleventh most populous, New Jersey with 20.1% of its population foreign born. While immigrants make up large proportions of the populations of several large states, they are not concentrated exclusively in a few states. By 2006, 17 states and the District of Columbia had populations that were 10% or more foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007a). The fact that so many states have significant proportions of foreign-born residents indicates that immigration and assimilation are areas that deserve attention across much of the nation. Table 1 on the following page has details of the states with more than 10% of their populations that are foreign born.

The large number of immigrants of college age has a number of implications for higher education institutions. If institutions serve large populations of immigrants and their children, they must understand and adapt to the differing needs of these students, because “...as the study of retention has developed, so too has awareness that each institution must tailor retention to fit the specific needs of its students and the context of that particular institutional environment” (Tinto, 2005, p.3).

Table 1

States with 10% or more of their 2006 populations foreign born

<b>Rank</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Percent of Population that is Foreign Born</b>
1	California	27.2
2	New York	21.6
3	New Jersey	20.1
4	Nevada	19.1
5	Florida	18.9
6	Hawaii	16.3
7	Texas	15.9
8	Arizona	15.1
9	Massachusetts	14.1
10	Illinois	13.8
11	Connecticut	12.9
12	District of Columbia	12.7
13	Rhode Island	12.6
	<b>United States</b>	<b>12.5</b>
14	Washington	12.4
15	Maryland	12.2
16	Colorado	10.3
17	New Mexico	10.1
17	Virginia	10.1

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007a

In discussing considerations for minority student retention, Rendon et al (2000) argued for sharing responsibility between the student and the institution writing that, “Theoretically, the concept of dual socialization seriously challenges the assumptions of separation. In addition, there are retention policy considerations. Navigating two landscapes, one of which is almost entirely different from home realities, requires both individual and institutional responsibility” (p.137). They emphasized that the institution has a major role, “To this end, the critical role of the institution cannot be overstated, yet it is often diminished in retention and involvement studies” (Ibid). It seems that problems of dual socialization of minority students would be exacerbated if the students were also new immigrants or the children of immigrants, with little exposure to the dominant culture, and with the appearance of being members of existing underclass groups when judged by race or ethnicity alone.

Immigrant students can often find support from family and community that alleviates some of the stress of dual socialization. The ability of immigrant youth to maintain contact, goals, and values with parents is thought to be more likely to lead to a positive acculturation experience that avoids intergenerational conflict and allows the students a better chance of social and economic mobility by avoiding pressures of downward assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes 1995). If that is correct, then one might expect to see some positive difference in outcomes for the immigrant students who lived with their families during the first year. In discussing high school attrition, Rosenthal (1995) found that although Haitians in the New York City area generally fit a high school leaver pattern of being poor, black, and living in families with much stress, within the Haitian community, “...the presence of a high level of social support

moderated the negative effects of the risk factors and transformed them into obstacles to be overcome---obstacles that did not deter, but rather highly motivated the youths to reach their goal” (p. 34). In discussing West Indian immigration into the United States, Waters (1999) wrote that “For today’s second generation, staying ‘ethnic’ and resisting certain kinds of Americanization can be the key to upward social mobility”( p.197). Gray, Rolph, and Melamid (1996) also noted that for immigrants, peer support may help alleviate acculturative stress. In their study of Latinas and Latinos in college, Barajas and Pierce (2001) found that “...successful Latinas found ways to carve out safe places through their relationships with other Latinas and to maintain a positive sense of racial ethnic identity” (p. 873).

#### Retention

College retention, persistence, and degree attainment have been studied exhaustively over the past several decades. Most models examine traits that are intrinsic to the student, traits that may have been developed in earlier education, and behaviors and attitudes that the student exhibits once he or she has matriculated to a college. This work examines a number of the same issues as they relate to immigrants in public four year higher education.

The main standardized test scores used for college admissions are the ACT and SAT exams. Tinto (1993) and Astin & Oseguera (2002) use the scores as an indicator of institutional selectivity, while other studies have SAT or ACT scores as an indicator of student ability (Aitken, 1982; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). In most of the studies, higher scores are reported to be positively related to higher retention and persistence.

Institutional commitment is an important factor in both Tinto's model of student integration, and in Bean's model of student attrition (Tinto, 1975 & 1993; Bean, 1980). Tinto's model proposed that retention and persistence is related to the ability of the student to leave his or her previous life and become integrated into the academic and social life of the higher education institution (1975, 1988, 1993). Living at home with family rather than on campus is a problem for establishing such integration. Tinto (1988) suggested that students who continue to live at home "may be unable to take full advantage of those (institutional) communities for integration into the social and intellectual life of the college" (p. 443), and Astin (1999) found that "Living in a campus residence was positively related to retention, and this positive effect occurred in all types of institutions and among all types of students regardless of sex, race, ability, or family background" (p. 523).

Family socioeconomic status (SES) plays a role in many models. Brower (1992) used a socioeconomic index developed by the U.S. Department of Education and found that SES was significant in predicting the number of semesters a student would remain enrolled in an analysis based on Tinto's Student Integration Model and in another analysis based on his own Life Task Model. Ishitani & DesJardins (2002-2003) found a significant inverse relationship between family income and dropout. Some researchers use family income or related financial measures to indicate SES. Others describe the construct as a function not only of income but of parental education. For this analysis, I use three measures of SES, family income, receipt of food stamps, and the parents' educational levels.

A major problem with most theories is that they deal only with traditional four year institution students. Indeed, Bean (1980) tested his model with a sample that was made up exclusively of White non-Hispanic, U.S. citizens, under the age of 22, single, first time full time freshmen in their first semester. He also biased the sample towards higher achieving students as measured by ACT scores, with only 2% from the lowest quartile. Consideration should be given to the different ways some factors such as test scores, living arrangements, and SES may affect immigrant populations.

The most basic example of differing impacts may be the relationship of living arrangements to success as measured by retention. While Astin's (1999) article on student involvement stated that living in a campus residence was the single most important contributing factor for staying in college, it was initially written in 1984, before the most recent wave of immigrants and the children of immigrants reached college age. Assimilation theory would suggest that living in a residence hall may not be positively related to retention for immigrant student who may be better served by maintaining a stronger grounding in the immigrant community. Alejandro Portes (1995) wrote that, "...immigrant youth who remain firmly ensconced in their respective ethnic communities, may, by virtue of this fact, have a better chance of educational and economic mobility through access to the resources that their communities make available" (p.251).

Higher education can be a major actor in the positive assimilation of immigrants into U.S. society. It cannot afford to assume that what works for the native born U.S. population will work in the same way for immigrants. This analysis will demonstrate that the relationships of a number of independent variables to one year retention to the same

institution are different for immigrants than for the U.S. born population, and that there are real differences in backgrounds and behaviors of these populations that go beyond the level of diversity assumed when race/ethnicity alone is the primary indicator of diversity. It will suggest that standardized measurements of ability such as ACT English and SAT Verbal scores may be inappropriate for immigrant students. The differing impacts of the students' living arrangements provides support to immigration and assimilation theory. Other findings are that lower socioeconomic status and a higher risk index score do not have as adverse effect on the immigrant populations as on the U.S. born population.

The analysis uses logit analysis to gauge the impacts of changes in the values of the independent variables on the dependent variable that represents a return to the first institution for the second year. A key part of the analysis is the use of variables that interact the independent variables with the student's immigration status. A simplified version of the larger model could be expressed as:

$$Y = f( B_1X_1 + B_2X_2 + B_3X_3 + B_4X_4 + B_5X_5 + B_6X_6 + B_7X_7 + (B_{n+1}(X_7 * X_1) + \dots B_{n+1}(X_7 * X_6)) + E$$

Where:

Y = A dependent variable representing one year retention to the same institution

X<sub>1</sub> = Demographic variables (Race/ethnicity, gender, age)

X<sub>2</sub> = English language use status

X<sub>3</sub> = Ability (Measured by standardized test scores, high school GPA, remedial course taking, etc.)

$X_4$  = Institutional Commitment (measured by living arrangements, distance to campus from home, work on campus, etc.)

$X_5$  = Risk index score

$X_6$  = Locale (Large City vs. Other locale)

$X_7$  = Immigrant status

$((X_7 * X_1) \dots (X_7 * X_6))$  = Other variables interacted with Immigrant status

$E$  = Random Variation Factor

The usual levels of statistical significance are reported throughout this section. When I write that something is statistically significant, it means statistical significance at the usual  $P < .05$ ,  $P < .01$ , and  $P < .001$  levels. However, I also report significance at the  $P < .15$  level and will specify in the text that significance is at this lower level when I do so. The detailed logit regression results for each significant variable are presented in tabular format after the discussion in the text.

### One-Year Retention at the Original Institution

There were 2,848 records with complete information that, weighted, represented a population of 511,154. A number of observations were dropped from the regression by the Stata program because they contained a variable with a value that predicted success or failure perfectly. The model had 214 degrees of freedom with an  $F$ -statistic of  $F(44, 171) = 4.13$ ,  $P > F = 0.0000$ , which means there is virtually no chance that the model as a whole has no significance.

The analysis showed that the demographic variables by themselves were not significantly related to one-year retention. There were no statistically significant

differences in one-year retention by racial/ethnic group, gender, or age. Immigrant status alone was not significantly related to one-year retention to the same institution. The use of a language other than English as a child was not significant. Whether the student attended school in an urban area or in some other locale was unrelated to retention.

However, when these variables were interacted with immigrant status, there was one that was significantly related to retention for immigrants. While students in general who attended school in a large city were no more or less likely to return to the first school for the second year than students who went to school in other locales, Immigrants who attended school in a large city were significantly more likely to return to that school for the second year, all things being equal. The standard demographic variables of race/ethnicity, gender, and age were not significantly related to retention even when they were interacted with immigrant status. These findings are not unique. DesJardins, Kim, and Rzonca (2002-2003) found no significant difference in the odds of dropout in the first year for Hispanics, Asians, or African Americans comparing those groups to White non-Hispanic students as the base group, and DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (1999) found no significant differences for the estimates of first stopout during the first or second year for any racial/ethnic group.

Two of the ability measures I used, Math SAT scores and High School GPA, were significantly and positively related to one-year retention. Verbal SAT scores were not significantly related to retention for the group as whole, nor was whether the student had attempted a remedial class.

High school GPA did not have a significantly different relationship to one-year retention by immigrant status. While Math SAT scores were positively related to

retention for all students, they had a significantly larger positive relationship to retention among immigrants (using a significance level of  $P < .15$ ). Although Verbal SAT scores were not significantly related to retention for the group as a whole, they were significantly related to retention for immigrants. Immigrants with higher Verbal SAT scores were actually less likely to return to the first institution than were U.S. born students with the same score or immigrants with a lower score. This means that not only are Verbal SAT scores useless as a predictor of one-year retention overall, their use as a predictor of one-year retention for immigrants is actually harmful.

There was no significant difference in retention by whether the student worked for pay during the school year, but the retention rate for students who worked more than 20 hours per week was significantly lower than for those who did not work at all or those who worked 20 hours or fewer each week. Whether working more than 20 hours a week is a measure of institutional commitment or a measure of SES and financial need is open to discussion. The retention rate for students who worked on campus or for the school was significantly higher than for those who did not work at all or who worked off campus. This involvement with campus life outside of classes or dorm life through work would be expected to have a positive effect on retention as it increased integration into the campus community. Whether the student lived with family and how far the school attended was from the student's permanent home were not significant.

I found several differences in the relationships of these behaviors to one-year retention for immigrants. Working for pay was unrelated to success for immigrants, but working on campus had a more positive effect on retention for immigrants than for the U.S. born at the  $P < .15$  levels. Working more than 20 hours a week had a significantly

more negative impact on retention for immigrants than for U.S. born students. Perhaps the most important finding in this group of variables is that, while living with family had no effect on retention for the group as a whole, living with family increased the likelihood that an immigrant student would return to the same school for the second year. This means that policies that seek to increase student integration by requiring first-year students to live on campus reduce the probability that immigrant students will return to the first school for the second year.

The risk index score was not significant on its own. However, the risk index score was significantly and positively related to one-year retention for the immigrants. I have no definitive explanation for this. However, while the mean risk index score is not significantly different for immigrants and the U.S. born students, several of the factors that make up the risk index were different. Significantly more of the immigrants delayed entry into PSE (26.5% to 18%), and a lower proportion of the immigrants worked full time (3.8% to 8.3%). Perhaps these behaviors impact the immigrants and U.S. born students differently but carry the same weight in the risk index. Further research is warranted.

Having at least one parent with a postgraduate degree was the only one of the parental education variables that was significant, and it had a positive relationship to one-year retention to the same institution. Neither family income as measured by the percent of poverty level the student's family income represented in 1995, nor the receipt of food stamps was significant for the group as a whole.

Again, some of the variables were differently related to one-year retention for immigrants and the U.S. born students. While family income measured as a percent of

federal poverty level was not significant for the group as a whole, it was significantly and positively related to retention for immigrants. The receipt of food stamps by the very few families who received them was perfectly related to success, so the Stata program dropped the 14 observations in which that occurred. Surprisingly, while having at least one parent with a bachelor's degree was not significantly related to one-year retention for the group as a whole, it was negatively related to retention for immigrants. Having at least one parent with a graduate degree was positively related to retention for the group as a whole, but was negatively related to success for immigrants. These results seem counterintuitive. One possibility may be that immigrants whose parents are not college educated may have immigrated because of educational opportunity, so are more motivated. Another possible hypothesis is that these are the children of well educated parents whose education has not transferred to American society. If these well educated parents have been forced into relatively menial labor, the children may devalue higher education. It could also be that the number of immigrants whose parents are college educated may be low enough that we get anomalous results. There are only 80 immigrants in the entire data set whose parents have bachelor's degrees and only another 56 whose parents have postgraduate degrees, and the observations for a number of these students may have been dropped from the regression because of missing information in the record. Certainly this should be the subject of further research. Details of the regression results are presented in Table 2 which follows.

Table 2

Significant results of the logit regression model for returning to the first school

for the second year

Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t
<b>Urban * Immigrant</b>	<b>6.09820</b>	<b>2.31094</b>	<b>2.64</b>	<b>0.009</b>
HSGPA	0.53322	0.13482	3.96	0.000
<b>Verbal SAT * Immigrant</b>	<b>-0.01262</b>	<b>0.00514</b>	<b>-2.46</b>	<b>0.015</b>
Math SAT	0.00199	0.00069	2.87	0.004
<b>Math SAT * Immigrant</b>	<b>0.01034</b>	<b>0.00656</b>	<b>1.58</b>	<b>0.116</b>
<b>Lived w/ Family * Immigrant</b>	<b>4.47482</b>	<b>1.53477</b>	<b>2.92</b>	<b>0.004</b>
Worked on campus or for the school	0.55932	0.21153	2.64	0.009
<b>Worked on campus or for the school *</b>				
<b>Immigrant</b>	<b>1.60689</b>	<b>1.05630</b>	<b>1.52</b>	<b>0.130</b>
Worked more than 20 hours week	-0.37076	0.18620	-1.99	0.048
<b>Worked more than 20 hours week *</b>				
<b>Immigrant</b>	<b>-6.92629</b>	<b>2.28569</b>	<b>-3.03</b>	<b>0.003</b>
<b>Risk index * Immigrant</b>	<b>8.44362</b>	<b>2.25990</b>	<b>3.74</b>	<b>0.000</b>
<b>Percent of poverty level 1995 *</b>				
<b>Immigrant</b>	<b>0.00408</b>	<b>0.00171</b>	<b>2.39</b>	<b>0.018</b>
<b>Parents bachelor's degree * Immigrant</b>	<b>-8.67226</b>	<b>2.39626</b>	<b>-3.62</b>	<b>0.000</b>
Parents graduate Degree	0.54071	0.21933	2.47	0.014
<b>Parents graduate Degree * Immigrant</b>	<b>-5.01049</b>	<b>1.60345</b>	<b>-3.12</b>	<b>0.002</b>

## Conclusions

It seems clear that if the downward assimilation of new immigrants is to be avoided, timing is important. Higher education institutions, especially in urban areas that have large immigrant populations, should be reaching out to immigrant communities to provide connections to an upward path to social mobility. This means that the institutions must be prepared for the fact that the immigrant groups have not been fully acculturated, and may not have fully developed English language skills and they must be prepared to provide appropriate services. The outreach to the communities should be focused on making sure that members of the community know about all of the various support mechanisms that are available to immigrant and language minority students. Given the importance of family and community in the lives of immigrant students, institutions might be wise to establish a relationship with the entire immigrant community by doing things like offering ESL and citizenship classes to members of the community or hosting centers to assist with assimilation and other potential cultural conflict issues. To wait until the group is more assimilated or until the members have a stronger grasp of English, is to risk losing at least one, and perhaps several generations to a set of diminished expectations. As Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) note, “Social mobility, as defined by changes in occupational status and income is inextricably linked to postsecondary education in modern American society” (p. 369). Public higher education can support that upward social mobility, or it can ignore the specific needs of these immigrant populations and bear witness to social mobility in a downward direction.

This analysis was limited by several factors. Chief among them was the inability to identify the children of immigrants and the lack of complete information on a number

of students, but especially on immigrants. For example, there were about 5,100 records in the entire sample but the data set had the graduation status of less than 4,000 of them and only of about 270 immigrants. There was complete data for the logit regressions for fewer than 3,000 students. The model does not have a huge amount of explanatory power. Part of this is because of missing variables. Much more contributes to retention than just the variables used in this study. Certainly individual motivation and work effort are not directly addressed by any of the variables.

Given these limitations, it is remarkable that the reported results were found. It is clear that immigrants both behave differently and are differentially impacted by a number of factors when compared to the U.S. born students. In other analyses, the results were reasonably consistent across several other success measures, and the results also are reasonable in light of current assimilation theory. However, rather than being definitive, they are suggestive and call for more research. The Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study begun in 2004 with a follow up in 2006 and another scheduled for 2009 should provide an opportunity for that research.

The questions are important. Postsecondary education, and especially bachelor's and higher education, is the best way to avoid having immigrants become a part of a permanent underclass with all that entails in lost human productivity and in simple social justice. Handled properly, after recognizing the different needs and behaviors of immigrants, public four-year higher education institutions can help to make the assimilation experience one that is positive and beneficial both for the immigrant culture and for the larger U.S. culture.

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