

they experience for the benefit of those who are not able to study abroad.

Inspiring and developing new global perspectives that help us see one another as members of the same family should be the educational priority of the 21st century. We all must do our part to rise to this challenge.

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# Immigrant Education

## Don't Forget the 1.4 Million Global Assets in New England's Backyard

MARCIA DREW HOHN

Many people in higher education are concerned about the declining numbers of foreign students attending New England colleges and universities. Restrictions on student visas since the September 11 terrorist attacks along with increasing competition from higher education institutions across the country and around the globe have both contributed to the decline. While New England higher education and economic leaders work to re-assert the region's magnetism abroad, they should refocus on the educational status of the 1.4 million foreign immigrants who already call New England home.

Foreign-born immigrants represent more than 10 percent of New England's population. According to a 2004 report by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, immigration is driving the region's population growth and profoundly affecting the region's economic and demographic character. The same Boston Fed report provides some important New England data gleaned from the 2000 census.

- New England immigrants differ from the foreign-born population in the United States overall. Nationally, more than half of immigrants are from Latin America, and 70 percent of that group comes from Central America or Mexico. In New England, by contrast, 34 percent of immigrants are from Europe, 30 percent from Latin America and 23 percent from Asia, with the remainder from Africa (5 percent) and Canada (7 percent). A large percentage of New England's Latin American immigrants are from the Caribbean, followed by South America and Central America.

- Most New England immigrants live in urban areas with many settling in areas of ethnic concentration. Massachusetts is home to 56 percent of the region's foreign-born residents, followed by Connecticut with 27 percent and Rhode Island with 9 percent. Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont have much smaller but rapidly growing immigrant populations.

**Before New England colleges and universities—and employers—put all their efforts into recruiting talent from abroad, they should think about the immigrants already here in New England.**

- Educational attainment among New England immigrants is high. Seventy percent have high school diplomas, 30 percent have college degrees, and 14 percent have advanced degrees. Recent immigrants claim even higher educational attainment, surpassing that of the native population. Highly educated immigrants are likely to be trained in high-demand fields such as computer science, mathematics, architecture, engineering and life and physical sciences. But many of these professionally trained people cannot attain the credentials they need to practice their occupations in the United States.

- Median household income among New England immigrants was \$42,900 in 2000—13 percent lower than the native population. Nearly a third of New England's immigrant households fall in the lowest income quartile of all New England households.

### Vital to economy

Recent studies have extolled the importance of immigrants to both the U.S. and New England economies. Five hundred-plus economists and scholars signed a recent letter to President Bush and Congress from the Independent Institute pointing out that immigration yields skills, capital, lower costs and entrepreneurship, and hailing immigration as “the greatest anti-poverty program ever devised.”

Studies by Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies have documented how Massachusetts and other Northeast states have become dependent on foreign immigration for population growth. The Northeastern research suggests that the Massachusetts labor force would actually have shrunk during the 1990s without immigrant labor. But as the Fed's household income figures reveal, the importance of immigration to the regional economy has not translated into economic success for the immigrants themselves.

### Speaking English

The first step to economic success for New England's immigrants is to obtain enough fluency in English to

communicate easily. Foreign-born adults rarely arrive in America speaking excellent English if they speak English at all. Most immigrants are not in a financial position to pay for English language classes, so they depend upon public services, namely the network of colleges, education agencies and community organizations offering Adult Basic Education (ABE). Fully 60 percent of the highly developed Massachusetts ABE system is devoted to ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). Connecticut and Rhode Island also offer vigorous ESOL services, while other New England states are just beginning to respond to rising ESOL demand. Still, the demand for ESOL far exceeds the services available in all New England states. In Massachusetts, 18,000 to 20,000 residents are on waiting lists for ESOL services at any given time, and they can expect to wait up to two years before a slot opens up.

### **We should be asking how we can successfully transition foreign-born adults into community college.**

Moreover, most public ESOL services are not designed to develop English beyond basic communication and certainly not to the level where one could effectively participate in community college programs. Since these two-year college programs have been shown to move people out of marginal incomes and offer an entrée to further higher education, we should be asking how we can successfully transition foreign-born adults into community college.

#### **Transitional education**

A further problem for adult immigrant students in community colleges is that much of their courseload is taken up with needed academic ESOL and “developmental” or remedial education. By the time they are ready to take *regular* courses, immigrant adults may have used up Pell Grants and other financial aid (and lost precious time).

Language is only one of the obstacles facing immigrants in American higher education. They are in unfamiliar territory and need special assistance with such areas as admissions, financial aid, study skills and career guidance.

Fortunately, new models for ESOL Transition are emerging that take some of these challenges into account. These programs are generally subsidized by foundations or public funds and, therefore, free of charge to participants. An upcoming report by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy identifies some important strengths shared by these ESOL transition models: One, they facilitate progress in postsecondary education through advanced ESOL courses that develop both English communications and academic language skills. Two, they align ESOL courses instructionally with credit-based introductory

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courses such as English Composition or Introduction to Psychology. Three, they have clear academic benchmarks for admission, strict attendance policies and procedures to regularly monitor student learning. Four, they help immigrant students navigate admissions and financial aid bureaucracies and provide college success skills and career guidance. Five, they emphasize a “learning community” approach where students are in a supportive cohort that travels through the college experience together.

There is an obvious need for more programs exhibiting these and other features, as well as programs designed intentionally to bridge identified education gaps and better prepare college faculty to address the needs of foreign-born adult students.

In addition, policy changes are needed to help foreign-born students pursue college. In particular, granting in-state tuition rates to undocumented immigrants who have proven track records of working and paying taxes seems both fair and economically prudent.

#### **Cast your buckets down**

Before New England colleges and universities—and employers—put all their efforts into recruiting talent from abroad, they should think about the immigrants already here in New England. They should consider how those New Englanders can be assets to the campus and the workplace, bringing diversity, talent, know-how and energy. They should recognize how the presence of immigrants provides native workers with the intercultural exposure and international savvy needed to compete in the global economy. And they should consider what these new residents need educationally and occupationally to thrive.

Booker T. Washington told an instructive story about overlooking what is right in front of you. A ship got stranded outside a harbor. Those on board had run out of water and were dying of thirst. They were frantically signaling to the shore to bring water. What they did not realize was that they were in the mouth of a river, surrounded by fresh water. The people on the shore kept signaling back “Cast your buckets down, where you are.” New England’s immigrants are working hard to improve their lives and the lives of their communities. We need to cast our buckets down ... and realize what these new New Englanders could do with a little recognition and support.

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