MOVING ON UP? ACCESS, PERSISTENCE, AND OUTCOMES OF IMMIGRANT AND NATIVE YOUTH IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION


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Despite evidence that prior waves of immigrants have largely been absorbed into American society, concern over the fate of newly arriving immigrants from Latin America and Asia persist. Much of the debate focuses on the pattern of their adaptation and the factors that explain different paths to incorporation. Immigration scholars, however, frequently treat theories of adaptation as antithetical; pitting one against the other from which one emerges as the superior account. To complicate matters, firm conclusions regarding the trajectory of adaptation are difficult to draw given the recent arrival of late-twentieth-century immigrants where the majority of the second-generation are still children and attend primary and secondary school. Only recently have second-generation immigrants begun to enter postsecondary institutions in large numbers and evidence of their future socioeconomic prospects more apparent.

In order to close these gaps in the extant literature and develop a greater understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the assimilation process, I revisit a fundamental question to the study of immigration: How well are immigrants assimilating into the American mainstream and what factors account for their pattern of incorporation? Specifically, the purpose of this study is to both describe and explain the postsecondary educational career paths of immigrant and native youth in the United States, through the lens of several theoretical perspectives of immigrant incorporation and within a status attainment perspective.

Generational trends among national origin groups over the 20th century indicate that second-generation immigrants consistently attain higher levels of education than their first and three-plus generation counterparts. The second-generation advantage, however, occurs within a segmented assimilation framework wherein European and Asian immigrants come to resemble the native white population across generations and immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries assimilate to educational levels near those of African Americans. Overall, none of theories examined fully account for generational differences. Empirical evidence is greatest for the optimism hypothesis as parental and student expectations are important factors. Results also show modest support for elements of the segmented assimilation theory, although evidence for selective acculturation is associated with immigrants’ homeland rather than conditions of the local environment.

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