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**Abstract: The Contribution of Foreign Schools to Educational Attainment in the United States**

*Introduction*

Immigration to the United States has both economic and social impacts. On the economic side, the skills and monetary resources of immigrants can create growth or dampen wages (or both). On the social side, immigrant communities can impact the social and institutional settings where they are found. Immigration has sometimes been overlooked as a factor shaping economic and social characteristics in the United States. This failure has sometimes led to misunderstandings about population groups and regions affected by immigration. However, efforts to correct these misunderstandings have often concentrated on the larger impacts – economic impacts, immigrant communities – while overlooking important, but less obvious effects.

The effect of immigration on education is one such area. Several writers have noted that immigration has led to a “barbell” shaped educational distribution in some places, with low-skilled immigrants flowing into the United States along with others possessing advanced degrees (Martin 1995, Frey 2004). Places with concentrations of high school dropouts, for example, tend also to have high immigrant populations (Bauman and Graf 2003). An unexamined assumption is that the characteristics of the immigrants themselves have created these conditions. The contribution of local schools, colleges and universities to the shape of the immigrant educational distribution has been largely ignored.

Among researchers not concerned with immigration, there is almost the opposite assumption. Rates of school dropout are usually assumed to be the responsibility of local schools even when large immigrant populations are present. Concern about high school completion, college completion, and the literacy level of adults has focused almost exclusively on the role of U.S. schools, while largely ignoring the role of immigration.

Clearly, both these stories cannot be completely true. Immigrant education levels are produced by conditions (including school systems) in foreign countries, but also by U.S. schools. What is unknown, to this point, is just where the balance lies.

If we measure where degrees are coming from, we can also better understand the economic situation of immigrants. Immigrants who obtained their education in their country of origin are sometimes at a disadvantage because education acquired abroad is less valued than human capital obtained domestically (Zeng and Xie 2004, Friedberg 2000). The quality of education in some sending countries is lower than in the United States. With certain majors, such as law, the training and knowledge learned at schools in sending countries may not be easily transferable to the U.S. job market. In addition.

education attained abroad may be undervalued by American employers unfamiliar with foreign schooling systems (Zeng & Xie, 2004, p. 1081).

### *Objective*

Currently, there are no comprehensive estimates of the extent to which credentials earned in other countries affect the educational distribution of the U.S. population. We will produce estimates of the number of such credentials, and how they are distributed among various segments of the population aged 25 and over. We are especially interested in the geographic distribution of high-education and low-education immigrant populations, and the degree to which foreign and U.S. schools contributed to this distribution.

### *Data*

We will rely primarily on data from the American Community Survey (ACS). Although this survey contains information on place of birth outside the United States and level of education attained, it does not have information on whether this education was received in the United States or elsewhere. In order to estimate the percentage receiving their degrees outside the United States, we will follow a procedure similar to that of Zeng and Xie (2004), who used a smaller scale survey that included information on country where highest degree was received to estimate the relationship between this and age of entry into the United States. Respondents to the 1990 Census were then classified as having United States or foreign degrees based on their age of entry.

Our approach will be to examine the factors related to receipt of degrees in the United States or elsewhere in the 2001 National Household Education Survey (NHES). Unlike Zeng and Xie, we will not be coding individual respondents in our larger survey, but estimating percentages of people in population groups. This will allow us to use a larger number of variables to estimate the propensity to have earned a degree in a foreign country. This will allow more accurate and up-to-date estimates of the distributions of degrees received by various population subgroups and across geographic areas.

### *References*

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