What Makes the Process of Acculturation Successful?
An Initial Report of a Study at Rutgers University

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The authors are solely responsible for all information, analyses and conclusions presented in this Report.
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**Manfredi Giliberti** received his B.S. from the Human Ecology Department at Rutgers University in 2009. He is currently enrolled at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education in the Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Master’s program. Manfredi has worked as a departmental assistant at the Food Policy Institute at Rutgers where he collected and managed data, as well as created reports for a project examining the use of qualified health claims in food advertisements directed at minorities in the United States. He also participated in launching the New Brunswick Community Farmers’ Market and provided support for the Food Policy Institute’s Meals on Wheels food safety auditing project. As the Project Coordinator for “What Makes Acculturation Successful? A Study of Immigrant Students at Rutgers University”, Manfredi feels particularly close to the research. Born in the US to immigrant parents, Manfredi’s family relocated to Italy when he was eleven years old. After completing elementary, middle, and high school, Manfredi returned to New Jersey to attend Rutgers and has shared many of the same experiences with the students in this study.
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Igda Martinez received her PsyD at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. As an Assistant Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine for the Montefiore School Health Program, Dr. Martinez’ clinical experience has focused on working with at risk youth. In her role as clinician, she strives to support immigrant families to encourage and sustain successful adaptation for their children. Her interests primarily involve exploring the processes of acculturation, ethnic identity, depression and self-esteem among immigrant students. Dr. Martinez is also interested in studying the motivating factors that lead immigrant children and adolescents to succeed in school.
Background

In the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, the United States experienced large scale and continuing immigration of people from around the world, particularly from Latin America and Asia. The United States currently has an immigrant population that numbers about 40 million people; this is the largest number of immigrants since the turn of the 19th Century when immigration was dominated by groups from Europe. These rapid changes in the cultural make-up of the U.S. population make understanding processes of acculturation and their relation to successful social adjustment critical issues (American Psychological Association, 2012).

The concept of acculturation has had a long and contested history in social science. Our study uses concepts and theory from anthropology to develop an innovative approach to the study of acculturation (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936; Herskovits, 1958; Spiro, 1955; Teske & Nelson, 1974). We define acculturation as the processes that immigrant students go through to maintain and learn about their family culture, while they simultaneously learn U.S. culture. There are many possible trajectories and outcomes for these processes, which vary by individual students and broader cultural groups. Key features of anthropological approaches to acculturation include: an emphasis on the processes rather than the traits of acculturation; a focus on the complex and changing balance between maintaining the culture of origin and adopting the new culture; and analysis of the role of broader societal perceptions about difference in the process of culture change. We focus on both institutional and interpersonal ways that power influences acculturation process. As examples, institutional forces include laws that enforce the use of English only and are experienced when immigrant students are punished for speaking their language of origin. Interpersonal ways that power is exercised include various forms of discrimination and insults that occur in the everyday lives of immigrant students.

This approach is different than the focus on assimilation in sociology or acculturation in psychology. In sociology, the focus has been on the assimilation of ethnic groups to U.S. society, where immigrants are hypothesized to progressively lose their culture of origin in order to become American (the classic statement of this position is Glazer and Moynihan’s Beyond the Melting Pot, 1970). The focus in psychology has been on measuring individual processes of acculturation through scale development that assess outward traits like language use, food preferences, and media involvement (Chun, et al., 2002), but do not tap into the more complex blending of cultures documented in this study. By returning to anthropological concerns and
approaches to the study of acculturation, we contribute both new conceptual and methodological dimensions to the examination of these processes.

Our study complements the literature on the adaptation and adjustment of immigrant and second generation young adults to educational settings. Several excellent studies have examined the processes of acculturation in secondary school students (Fuligni, et. al., 2007; Kasnitz, et al., 2006, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Stepick & Stepick, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, et al., 2008; Fernandez-Kelly & Portes, 2008). They have looked across ethnic groups and across the U.S. to examine the factors that influence how students adapt to U.S. society and what factors predict their academic achievement and social integration in secondary schools. Our study amplifies recent work that focuses on educational success among immigrant children and the development of skills to support successful, productive, and healthy adult lives (Glick & White, 2003; Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, 2004; Fernandez-Kelly & Portes, 2008).

Our research is timely, in that, although national surveys indicate that the majority of immigrant parents expect their children to attend higher education (Glick & White, 2003), wide educational disparities exist between youth of immigrant backgrounds and American children. For instance, while many Latino parents report that their immigration to the United States was in part motivated by the wish to improve their children’s academic opportunities and future outcomes (Behnke, Piercy, & Diversy, 2004), Latino youths are at great risk of academic failure (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Immigrant youth are as likely to succeed in college as American born children, however, achievement trends vary greatly across immigrant subgroups (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, 2004).

Few studies have followed immigrant youth into university to understand how young adults successfully achieve admission to university and make the transition to higher education (Fuligni, 2007; Fernandez-Kelly & Portes, 2008). There is a lack of studies that explore in detail how immigrant students successfully make it to university; how they translate their own and their families’ high academic aspirations into reality.

The Project

Our study examines the impact of acculturation processes and social and cultural capital on the successful transition from high school to university. Our study focuses on this transition through careful inclusion of a broad sampling of the diverse student body at Rutgers University. In this research project, we interviewed 176 immigrant young adults in 22 focus groups recruited through student cultural organizations at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. By immigrant students, we mean students who have immigrated to the U.S. themselves (first generation; N=64) or who are children born in the U.S. of immigrant parents (second generation; N=96).
Our study is explicitly comparative across a diverse range of immigrant students in terms of countries of origin, social status, prior English language knowledge, family educational experiences, experiences of discrimination, and a variety of social support systems. By selecting a broad group of students, we have investigated this diversity, while identifying both commonalities in the acculturation process and ethnic group specific experiences.

Our approach to the study of acculturation and its impact on educational success is different and innovative in several ways. We use the words and experiences of diverse Rutgers University students who have themselves gone through the process to develop the conceptualization and assessment of acculturation. We examine the similarities and differences in these experiences by interviewing a wide range of students from different ethnic backgrounds simultaneously, rather than focusing on one or two cultural groups, as previous research has done.

In this initial report of results, we integrate qualitative data from focus groups with immigrant students and quantitative data from questionnaires that the participants filled out after the focus groups. The quantitative data allows us to compare across individuals and cultural groups to see what is unique and common to different ethnic groups. These data are the core of the charts in this report. The qualitative data allows us to explore the experiences of diverse students in more detail and gives us insights into the process of acculturation as they relate to educational attainment. These data, and particularly quotes from the focus groups, are used to develop the Initial Findings, the Introductions to each section of the Report, and the Recommendations.

By focusing in detail on the differing trajectories of immigrant students to Rutgers University, our study provides a deeper understanding of the successful process of acculturation to U.S. society. Given the importance of attaining a university education in American society today, we are using admission to university, in this case Rutgers University, to define what we are referring to as “successful acculturation.” Through the rich data generated in this study, we provide new insights into “what really matters” in acculturation processes (Kleinman, 2007) and how these processes influence the journey of immigrant students to higher education.
Sample

We recruited students through the large and diverse array of student cultural organizations at Rutgers University. We approached each organization to explain the purpose of the study and to enlist their help in organizing a focus group of approximately 8-10 students who were either immigrants or children of immigrant parents. We attended meetings of each organization to explain the study, identify volunteers to participate in the focus groups, and obtain contact information directly from potential participants.

We carried out 22 focus groups with 176 participants that represented a diverse group of African, Asian, Caribbean, European and Latino immigrant students. Focus groups reflected the membership of the cultural organizations; most were a mix of men and women except for the fraternities. For the analyses presented in this Report, we used a sample of 160 students, as we eliminated international students who had come to Rutgers just for study and were not immigrants. We also included 3 focus groups that were not recruited through the cultural organizations.

The study was approved by the Rutgers University IRB on October 30, 2009. Students were asked to consent both to their participation in the group and to be audio recorded. We assured the confidentiality of their responses and obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to further protect participants.

Data Collection: Focus Groups and Questionnaires

Prior to initiating the focus groups, all participants filled out informed consent forms. The focus group leader used a flexible agenda to guide the focus group discussion. The focus group leader provided a general overview of the discussion, explaining that the purpose of the group was to examine the processes of adaptation and adjustment that immigrant youth and their families go through to successfully negotiate life in the United States (the focus group protocol is available by request from the Principal Investigator).

It is important to emphasize that not all questions are asked in any given focus group. The questions were designed as a guide for the range of topics to be discussed, but not necessarily asked in the specific form or the same order as they appear in the focus group protocol. Also, it should be noted that participants themselves were allowed to define their own ethnic identities and how they understood U.S./American culture.

After the focus groups, students filled out a structured questionnaire (the full questionnaire is available by request from the Principal Investigator). The answers to the questionnaire are based on student self-reports to structured questions. The questionnaires allow us to examine the similarities and differences across the diversity of immigrant students at Rutgers and form the basis for the quantitative data presented in this Report.
Focus Group Methodology

We chose focus groups as the method of data gathering because they are an excellent qualitative methodology for exploring group ideas about an issue and eliciting perspectives directly from the participants (Merton, 1946, 2001; Morgan & Krueger, 1998). As Merton (2001) notes, focus groups are an important part of an iterative approach of qualitative and quantitative research on a topic and are particularly important in generating new research measures and hypotheses.

Analysis of the Focus Groups

All the focus groups were professionally transcribed for analysis and archiving. The transcriptions of the focus groups discussions were entered into the Atlas.ti program for coding and analysis. Atlas.ti allows researchers to create coding networks that capture the complex and multiple relationships among key measures. Building on the successful approach we developed for analyzing previous focus group research (Martinez & Guarnaccia, 2007), we used an iterative process for coding and analyzing the focus group transcripts. This approach builds on both grounded theory research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and content analysis in anthropology (Bernard, 2005). Illustrative quotes from the focus groups are interspersed through this Report to provide a richer sense of key themes from the research. Members of the research team first independently identified key themes from the focus groups. We then met as a group to select those quotes that we agreed illustrated those themes and included these throughout this report.

Analysis of the Questionnaires

All of the data from the questionnaires was entered into a database and verified for accuracy. Using the STATA data analysis program, we did univariate frequencies of all the variables. We then selected those results that related most to the themes of the kinds of social and cultural capital that immigrant families tapped into to support their children’s educational attainment and other factors, such as discrimination, that might pose challenges to their success. We also directly assessed students’ and families’ ideas about the importance of pursuing higher education. The charts in this report reflect these choices of data to present. Where students were similar in their responses to the questions, we report data for the entire sample together. Where there were important differences among the broad ethnic groupings, these differences are highlighted in the charts.
This section reports on initial findings from our analyses of the focus group interviews. We identify what we see as some of the key factors that lead to the successful transition to higher education. These findings are based on our preliminary qualitative analysis of our focus group data. In the following sections we report on the quantitative data that describe the social and cultural capital that supported students’ attainment of higher education.

A key finding of our study is that immigrant students achieve their incredibly high educational aspirations by embodying the goal of attending university. These aspirations became part of the narratives of how students defined themselves, of who they were, and of why their families had endured impressive sacrifices to come to the U.S.

A key metaphor that describes the challenges students face while acquiring the skills they developed while crossing cultures was of the front door of the students’ family home acting as a dividing line between cultures. When they were inside the door, they spoke their language of origin, changed their style of dress, addressed family members in culturally appropriate ways, and ate ethnic foods. When they went out the door, they switched to their American identities – speaking English, dressing like other students, eating more American foods. What bridged the indoor and outdoor worlds were the students’ and parents’ educational aspirations and how these families and students aligned their behaviors at home to meet the academic opportunities of the host culture. This ability to fluidly code switch was an important skill students developed, which gave them cognitive flexibility. It was both a source of pride and, at times, a source of stress as they worked to balance two worlds.

“The research considers us successful because we made it to college. I think we wouldn’t be here without our parents. That’s just the bottom line. Our parents had so much personal drive and so much dedication to bring us to where we are now that there’s no way that we can take full credit for being where we are right now.” [Korean student]

“The reason why we came to this country was for us to study to have better schooling, so from the plane going from Peru to here, that was the very first things that I heard and even to this day, that’s the last things [...] You have to get an education. You have to do it. My father had a really nice job back in Peru and he gave that up and I saw how hard he was working because he had to take a very much lesser position here for us to come. So I know that there was a struggle. My mom was a stay-at-home mom in Peru and she had to start working and that was really hard for her too, but they always told me, like most parents do, we’re doing this so you can go to college.” [Peruvian student]
Based on our analyses of the focus group and quantitative data, we feel the following points address the question: What Makes Acculturation Successful? They summarize some of our key insights into what resources and supports helped these immigrant students make it to higher education.

1. Students strongly felt that they had to repay their parents for the sacrifices they made to bring them to the U.S. They considered doing well in school and successfully being admitted to and then graduating from university as the best way to repay their parents’ sacrifices.

2. These educational aspirations became part of who the students were; the students embodied them. One of the features that distinguish these students is that they not only heard and could repeat these messages about educational success, but they also came to believe them and to share the strong attachment to this goal.

3. Students received support from their extended families to achieve higher education. For some students, older siblings who had already made it to higher education served as key guides about how to succeed. Students often commented that their extended family also pushed for academic success and provided a range of resources to achieve it.

4. Community support was also important to educational achievement. A range of community resources provided assistance and encouragement to the students in this study. Ethnic schools, in their many forms, provided key resources, as they supported positive ethnic identity development and often countered discrimination from the broader society. By teaching language and culture, they deepened students’ appreciation of who they were and where they came from. Ethnic schools provided networks of information about many aspects of how to successfully make it to higher education. Ethnic schools were most common among the Asian American and European American students.

5. Programs at secondary schools that supported attending higher education were also important. Schools varied widely in the resources they could provide immigrant students, often depending on the social and economic resources in the schools and communities. Guidance counselors could make a big difference in both answering pragmatic questions about applying to university and inspiring students to achieve higher education. But students talked about too many guidance counselors who did not have the time or resources to support them and in some cases, discouraged students from applying to university.

“Pretty much like the second you step out of the door, like that’s when it switches, and you have to be American. And I would go to school and they’d [parents] encourage me to participate in the school orchestra or in sports. But I feel like even as I do these things, who I really am would come out.” [Italian student]
**Limitations**

As with all studies, this research project has several limitations. It is important to make these explicit so that readers have a context for drawing conclusions from this report.

1. We did not do a comparison with immigrant students who did not make it to higher education.
2. Most of our sample consisted of students belonging to Rutgers Cultural Organizations. This is a select group of students who are more likely to be interested in exploring their cultural backgrounds and who used these organizations for support.
3. Our sample is not random. While we contacted a wide range of Rutgers Cultural Organizations, we worked with those who were willing to participate in the study. Since the sample is not random, we present descriptive statistics for the study, but do not statistically test for differences among the groups.
4. We selected quotes for this report that illustrated key themes across the focus groups. We worked to reflect the comments of diverse student participants. At the same time, we are continually working on a much deeper qualitative analysis of the focus group transcripts that will provide additional themes and inter-relationships among themes. These relationships are suggested in a preliminary way in this Report.

**How to Read This Report**

This Report presents data on a diverse group of immigrant students at Rutgers University. In order to meet the diverse needs of its users, the Report includes summary tables and figures developed to provide an overview of the study participants. Each section of the Report includes an Introduction that both highlights key points from the data and presents illustrative quotes from the focus groups. Following the Introduction are a series of charts that present the quantitative data from the questionnaires that were administered to all students. Some of the charts summarize data for all the students we interviewed. Comments under each chart highlight the key points and add information about differences across the groups where relevant. This comparative data is not always shown in the Report. Some charts provide insight into group-specific responses to the questionnaire. There is a range of additional qualitative information regarding these data outside the scope of the Report that will be the focus of further analyses and articles.

The Recommendations that follow the charts come from the data included in this report and from a broader analysis of the focus group data. The Recommendations are designed to speak to universities, communities, and families about how to improve the academic success of immigrant students. While some of the Recommendations are specific to our local context, the implications of the Recommendations hopefully speak to a broader audience.
Introduction

This section presents the demographic profile of the sample of 160 immigrant students from 21 focus groups used in this report. Acculturation processes look different across the student groups. These processes are affected by the social resources and cultural experiences families bring with them. This section gives an overview of some of these different forms of social and cultural capital.

The hallmark of these findings is **DIVERSITY** – both within and between groups. Our findings reflect the overall demographics of Rutgers University, where no broad ethnic group constitutes a majority of students. For the University as a whole, 44% of undergraduate students are White, 24% are Asian, 13% are Latino and 10% are African American. When we look at the New Brunswick campus where this study was done, 46% of students are White, 26% are Asian, 12% are Latino and 7% are African American (source: IPEDS Fall 2012 Enrollment Report, Rutgers Office of Institutional Research).

Since we sampled through the more than 50 cultural organizations at Rutgers, our sample reflects the diversity and distribution of those organizations across ethnic groups. At the same time, our sample only includes those groups that responded positively to our invitation to participate. Our final sample includes 3 African/Caribbean, 8 Asian, 5 European, and 4 Latino student cultural organizations. One focus group included a diverse sample of students that cut across all the ethnic groups. Twelve percent of participants are African or Caribbean students, 44% are Asian, 21% are European, and 23% are Latino. While we are very aware of the limitations of these broad ethnic categories, they are useful for simplifying the presentation of data and for protecting the confidentiality of the specific cultural organizations we worked with. Our sample does not reflect the proportional representation of ethnic groups at Rutgers nor in the New Jersey population.

This study's findings confirm Rutgers' commitment to diversity as expressed in its motto: *Jersey Roots, Global Reach.*

It is clear from the data in this section that the families of Asian students possess more social and cultural capital than other families. Using these criteria, Latino students are most disadvantaged. At the same time, all the students in this study have successfully made it to Rutgers and most into the upper-class years.
Women participants outnumber men; the reverse is true among Latino participants. This difference is in part explained by a sampling bias, as two Latino fraternities participated that included only men.

Overall at Rutgers-New Brunswick, African American (1,380 vs. 883) and Latina (1,899 vs. 1,727) women enroll in somewhat higher numbers than men. However, Asian men (4,023) enroll at a somewhat higher number than Asian women (3,804) (source: Undergraduate Admissions and IPEDS 2012 First-Year Undergraduate Students, Rutgers Office of Institutional Research).
The majority of students who participated in the study were third year students and above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Freshman</th>
<th>Sophomore</th>
<th>Junior</th>
<th>Senior/Alumni</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African &amp; Caribbean</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
<td><strong>53</strong></td>
<td><strong>58</strong></td>
<td><strong>160</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of Asian students were born in the US, while slightly over half of Latino students were born in their countries of origin.

African/Caribbean students and European students had a plurality of US-born students.
Demographics

Foreign-Born Students’ Countries of Birth

- There is exceptional diversity in the birth countries of the foreign-born students. While it is a bit difficult to read all the data on this chart, it visually gives the feel of this diversity.

- Countries and colors go from left to right in the legend starting with Cameroon, and proceeding clockwise on the chart starting from the top dark blue slice, where the arrow is. Shades of blue represent African/Caribbean countries, reds Asian countries, greens European countries, and purples Latin American countries.

- The numbers in the legend represent the percent and number of students born in that country.
The largest group of students is Catholic. Catholic students are represented across all the ethnic groups in the study; particularly among the Latino and European students.

Beyond Catholicism, students are diverse in their religious affiliations, reflecting the diversity of Rutgers students.
Maternal Education by Ethnicity

- Asian students’ mothers had the highest levels of educational attainment; Latino students’ mothers had the lowest levels.
Paternal Education by Ethnicity

- Asian students’ fathers had the highest levels of educational attainment; Latino students’ fathers had the lowest levels.
Half of Asian students reported annual family incomes greater than 100K, the highest of all the ethnic groups.

Latino students reported the lowest annual family incomes, with about one third reporting annual family income of less than 20K.
Introduction

Language is a major encoder of culture and a vehicle for its transformation. Because culture is a shared phenomenon passed from one generation to the next, language becomes the core medium for the communication and creation of culture. The centrality of language to culture is a key reason it has been so prominent in the measurement of acculturation (Chun, Balls Organista & Marin, 2003). Language diversity has a long history in the U.S. “Contrary to what some Americans seem to believe, the United States has historically been a polyglot nation containing a diverse array of languages.” (Rumbaut & Massey, 2013:141)

Language is a key tool for social action; it is how people make their mark on the world. At the same time, language cements social relationships and makes human sociality possible (Enfield, 2013). Thus, it is not surprising that language is central to immigrant students’ acculturation experiences. Some students were very concerned about maintaining their language abilities in their family language, as the following quote illustrates. At the same time, the quote highlights the kinds of challenges immigrant students face maintaining their languages of origin in the U.S.

“I never ever was ashamed of my language. I always spoke it when my parents came around. Kids were cruel, but I really did not care. I still don’t care. I always speak in my language when I call my parents. I speak English here too much. That kind of annoys me because the other Ghanaians, they always want to speak English too. I don’t want to lose my language and I’m trying to perfect it.” [Ghanaian student]

For other students, whose parents had immigrated at younger ages, language acculturation was a multi-generational process.

“Vietnamese was my first language, but right now I really can’t speak it anymore. As I went to school my family focused on teaching me more English because my parents, they were high school age when they immigrated, so they learned English so they could speak to me fluently in English.” [Vietnamese student]

Another dynamic in the U.S. is the hostility to other languages, as expressed most publicly in “English only” movements. As Rumbaut and Massey (2013:142) note: “The great American paradox is that while the United States historically has been characterized by great linguistic diversity propelled by immigration, it has also been a zone of language extinction, in which immigrant tongues die out and are replaced by monolingual English.”

The process of language extinction has not been a passive one, but often results from discriminatory practices in various social contexts, as the following quote indicates.

“One thing that happened to me at a younger age is that I got detention for speaking Spanish in class. I actually was punished because I spoke Spanish and I asked the teacher why are you punishing me because I spoke a language that I’ve
grown up with. And at that time, I was in seventh grade and it was just like sometimes Spanish would come out because I was speaking - I came from a place where at least 90% of the class spoke Spanish.” [Latino student]

Overall, what is striking in our results is how many students have maintained some degree of fluency in their family languages. Only 9 of the 160 students who participated in our focus groups were monolingual in English. One hundred twenty-two of the students spoke a family language well or very well and 144 understood their family language well or very well. Our relatively small sample spoke 33 different languages.

Nationally 21% of Americans speak a language other than English at home; the Census identified 300 languages spoken in U.S. households. Of this 21%, Spanish is the most widely spoken of these languages; 62% of these households reported that Spanish was the major language spoken at home. At the same time, among Spanish-speakers, 75% reported speaking English “well/very well” (Ryan, 2013). As in our focus groups, bilingualism is common in the U.S. and even higher among immigrant students at Rutgers.

Among the students in our sample, languages of origin were learned and maintained through a number of processes. Many students lived in homes where their parents had rules about only speaking the family language; other families emphasized speaking English because of concerns for success in school. Living in multigenerational families, especially with grandparents, supported students’ use of family languages.

“I actually first started speaking Italian. I didn’t know any English until about first grade. So I didn’t really learn English until I went to school. My grandparents only spoke Italian. My father still to this day really only speaks Italian. He knows a little bit of English, but just conversational pieces. My mother speaks English well. But I actually first started speaking Sicilian and then maybe later on and maybe when I was like seven or eight, my mother saw that I was only speaking Sicilian and I wasn’t really speaking correct Italian, and she really encouraged me to start learning how to speak proper Italian” [Italian student]

Living in ethnic enclaves encouraged family language use. Many students also attended programs at ethnic schools, churches and mosques that supported learning languages of origin. Finally, taking courses at Rutgers further solidified students’ linguistic skills.
In addition to English, participants in our sample self-reported speaking 33 different languages.

Languages and colors go from left to right in the legend starting with Creole, and proceeding clockwise on the chart starting from the top dark blue slice, where the arrow is. Shades of blue represent African/Caribbean languages, reds Asian languages, greens European languages, and purple Spanish.

Spanish was the most widely spoken language, reported by 37 participants (25%). If we add up all the Indian languages, they are the second largest language group (22 students, 14%).
Social context is very important to determining language usage. Students in our study are very adept at code-switching, at shifting language use depending on whom they are speaking to.

Most students use their language of origin when speaking with their families. The overwhelming majority of students speak English with their friends.

The large majority of students think in English. European origin students were most likely to think in their language of origin.
Almost all participants understood their families’ languages of origin either well or very well. Over 80% of students spoke their families’ languages of origin well or very well.

Students had less proficiency in reading and writing, though about half read and wrote their families’ language of origin well or very well.

Surprisingly, Asian students reported the lowest overall language proficiency. This finding is somewhat puzzling given the prominence of culture and language schools in Asian communities. The fact that Asian students had the highest proportion of being U.S. born may help explain this finding.
Introduction

Ethnic identity is a complex construct. Ethnic identity focuses on how much people relate to their ethnic group in terms of membership and feelings in contrast to how much they relate to the larger society. Phinney (2007:279), one of the key researchers of ethnic identity, argues that “the core of ethnic identity is a sense of self as a group member that develops over time through an active process of investigation, learning and commitment.” Ethnic identity formation is a critical component of acculturation. Stronger ethnic identity can buffer some of the negative effects of discrimination that immigrant students perceive from society.

In this project we asked students to identify their multiple ethnic identities and then to pick the one that best describes them (Phinney, 2007; Trimble, 2007). The charts present the ethnic identity that students most identify with, though they were able to list up to three identities. Students self-selected the words and categories to describe themselves; we provided no examples or prompts in the questionnaire.

What comes through in the charts is the wide range of identities among the students in our study and the variety of responses. Some students used global identities; others used specific country or regional identities. Some highlighted mixed identities, while others used hyphenated or simply American identities.

Coming to Rutgers provided many students a chance to connect with others who shared their identities in ways that had not been possible before. A student from Georgia (part of the former Soviet Union) expressed his excitement at finding others who shared his background.

“Because as Georgians that is really important to us to keep our culture. That’s one of the things that we value the most, our history, our traditions, our identity in general. And also, connecting with other Georgians in America also gave us that united sense, also at Rutgers University we formed a group to like share our history - we instantly united, because we have so much in common.” [Georgian Student]

As many of the students stated, developing an ethnic identity in the U.S. is not a neutral process. Students got subtle and sometimes explicit messages about whether their background is valued as much as that of a stereotypical American. This was particularly well stated by a Filipino student.

“I think one of the earliest memories of me sort of understanding that the Filipino culture was not going to be important to me in terms of success in the United States was when - I think there was this one girl in our class that [...] that everyone liked and you kind of think, oh, in order to be successful, you have to be that girl [...] I have to be this sort of person in order for me to be successful in America; she was blonde-haired, blue-eyed, was a fan of the Yankees.” [Filipino student]
Issues of ethnicity, race, and racism also were significant for students, especially those of African origin. Students, such as the Haitian student whose quote appears below, were constantly working to find their identity in contexts where their reference groups shifted and the broader society devalued their heritage.

“I think in my high school, there was a big difference. There were the Haitians from Haiti that were in ESL classes and there were the Americanized Haitians [...] The ESL Haitians didn’t like the Americanized Haitians because they weren’t Haitian enough. And then the Black Americans, they didn’t like Haitians in general. So it’d be like Haitians fighting Blacks, and you had to deal with, within the Haitian community in the school, you have the ESL Haitians that don’t like Americanized Haitians. So it was always like a big conflict. I’m caught right in the middle.”

[Haitian student]

Many students went through periods where they felt “neither here nor there,” where it was challenging to find a place where they were valued. The Rutgers Cultural Organizations often served as welcoming homes for students who were searching for a place where they could be themselves, as this Dominican student expressed so well.

“I feel like we all have some kind of issues, especially struggling with a Dominican American identity that we’ve sort of gotten accustomed to. Because it’s like what we’ve been saying: ‘ni aqui ni alla’ (neither here nor there) [...] You carry the national mentality of yes, you’re from Dominican but you’re in a foreign land so people ask you “where are you from?” You look different so they’re expecting you to say that you’re from somewhere foreign [...] So it’s like always a struggle, a balancing act of whether you’re Dominican or you’re American and I feel like [our student organization] sort of helps us - I mean helps me keep grounded in terms of not drowning in an ocean that is Rutgers because for us, it’s definitely really really hard to find a place to sort of fit in [...] because it was so different from what we were used to.”

[Dominican student]

The development of ethnic identity is a lifelong process that changes and shifts over time (Tsai & Fuligni, 2012). The following charts present a snapshot of where the students in our study are now. As in other data that we present, the intra and inter-ethnic diversity is dramatic and is an important finding of our study. We first share the ethnic identities of students using broad groupings. We then report on two questions about cultural affiliation and efforts to learn about their culture. The broad impression is that immigrant students are actively seeking to continue to develop their ethnic identities in a variety of ways: through cultural organizations and courses at Rutgers and through participation in family and community activities.
Twenty students from Africa and the Caribbean self-reported 11 ethnic identities.

Their identities were split between country specific identities and regional identities, such as West Indian or African. Previous research has found that foreign born students use country specific identities, while more acculturated students tend to use pan-ethnic identities.
The 65 Asian students self-reported 24 ethnic identities.

The largest group of students identified as Indian, though Indian students used a range of regional identities as well, such as Gujurati.

The East Asian students were more likely to use hyphenated American identities.
Among the 30 students whose families immigrated from Europe, they self-reported 15 ethnic identities.

Country of origin was the dominant cluster for ethnic identities among European students.
The 36 Latino students self-reported 13 different ethnic identities.

In contrast to the other groups, the largest identity category was the group label of Latino.
- Students reported sharing feelings of affiliation with both their ethnic group and Americans. These findings were consistent across the data for specific sub-groups in our study.

- In terms of feeling understood and sharing values, they felt more affiliation with their ethnic group than with Americans. No participant used the category “Only American.”

- At the same time, they felt equally comfortable with and knew the expectations of both members of their ethnic group and Americans.
Respondents across all the ethnic groups reported strong ties to their cultures of origin.

Students felt a strong attachment to their ethnic group and had a clear sense of their ethnicity.

Somewhat shaped by their membership in cultural organizations, they felt it was important to participate in cultural practices and to spend time learning about their ethnicity.
Introduction

It is upsetting, but not altogether surprising, that students in our study reported perceiving discrimination from both peers and adults in their lives. These findings are supported by previous studies by Huynh and Fuligini (2010, 2012) and Perreira and colleagues (2010). These studies found that Latino youth experienced more discrimination compared to Asian or European youth and that for all youth, discrimination had serious consequences in terms of psychological well-being and academic performance.

Overall, various kinds of discrimination were experienced by students in our study. These ranged from more subtle forms of feeling disvalued to more overt discrimination. The ability to overcome discrimination and maintain a sense of cultural pride is important to successful acculturation.

Muslim students faced particularly strong discrimination in a post-9/11 world. The following quote reflects blatant forms of discrimination that they endured.

“When people in my class used to tell me, oh, Osama’s your uncle and Osama’s this and they used to bully me and I even got suspended a few times. We used to get in fights. I mean how would you tolerate somebody is calling you related to a terrorist? So there were a lot of issues that I personally faced.” [Middle Eastern student]

The negative effect of experiencing discrimination is captured in this quote from a Latino participant, reflecting on his experiences playing soccer.

“I played against other American teams and they would call me dishwasher. Go back to wash dishes. What’s your country? Go get your green card. Stuff like that. Any name you could think of, they would call us that because they would lose, like 5-0, 7-0 or whatever.” [Latino student]

One of the African students in our groups expressed the more general strain of having to “blend in” all the time to avoid discrimination. Even when teachers heard discriminatory comments, they did not deal effectively with them.

“I think the best thing was just trying to blend in, just so you wouldn’t get made fun of, to tell you the truth. Because I mean teachers really didn’t do anything, like, oh, since this person’s of a different culture, let’s have this so you can learn about their culture. I mean, not to be mean, but I don’t think they really cared because their main job was just to teach what they need to teach. So you’re just pressured to blend in and see if they accept you or not.” [African student]
Discrimination due to accents was an issue that cut across many of the students we interviewed. Students reported being placed in ESL classes due to strong accents even when they spoke English well. Other students were assigned to speech therapy to help them lose their accents; a not so subtle message that the way they spoke was disvalued by the larger society. One Polish student, who was born in the U.S. but spoke only Polish at home, felt that he was treated as less intelligent than other students because he had a strong accent.

Student: “At least in my middle school and high school, there was not that many immigrants where I went to school. Most teachers, I found that they were kind of pushing me off. I mean not that I was different - different, but I noticed that they didn't challenge me as much as I know some of my friends and - not that they called me stupid or dumb, but I realized that they didn't treat me kind of the same way. It took me sometimes longer for some things to understand [...]”

Moderator: Do you think it had something to do with your accent?

Student: I mean it was possible because I - because I know there's not that much - at least in my middle school especially, there weren't that many people with heavy thick accents.” [Polish student]

African, Caribbean and Latino students felt discrimination particularly acutely before coming to university. In many ways, Rutgers created safe spaces for students through the great diversity of the student body, the large number of cultural organizations, the activities at cultural centers, and the range of courses on the ethnic experience that allowed for understanding the history of their groups and for processing their experiences through a broader lens.

Cultural organizations on university campuses help to support positive identity development. They also enhance social networks that can help new generations of students learn to navigate the university.
Participants assessed the degree to which they perceived their ethnic group to be viewed positively by the broader society. Responses were given on a 5 point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with the midpoint being neutral. The bars combine the responses of agree and strongly disagree. Neutral was the most frequent response.

European students felt that their group was viewed most positively by society, followed by Asian students. African/Caribbean and Latino students felt more strongly that their groups were viewed less positively.
Participants assessed the level of discrimination they perceived from adults on a 5 point Likert scale from never to all the time. The bars combine the responses of sometimes/often/all the time as compared to never/rarely (not shown).

- African/Caribbean and Latino students experienced much higher rates of discrimination from adults than European or Asian students across all the types of discrimination.

- Asian students perceived more unfair treatment and being received with less respect than European students.
Participants assessed the level of discrimination they perceived from peers on a 5 point Likert scale from never to all the time. The bars combine the responses of sometimes/often/all the time as compared to never/rarely (not shown).

- African/Caribbean students reported the highest experiences of discrimination across all three categories.
- Latino students reported higher rates of unfair treatment and receiving less respect from peers than Asians or Europeans.
- Asian students reported being insulted more often than European or Latino students.
Participants were asked to report the number of times they experienced language discrimination during the past year. This chart reports on responses of 1 or more times by ethnic group.

- Language discrimination due to an accent was more common among African/Caribbean and Latino students.

- Not being expected to speak English was a frequent and insulting experience across all the groups.
Family Ties

Introduction

Family ties and strong social networks help immigrant students succeed and cope with many of the acculturation stressors they face, and also support their educational aspirations. Families, broadly defined, motivate students to excel in their education and provide resources for making their way to higher education. As Fuligni and colleagues (1999:1040) noted, strong family ties are linked to other important values: “Among adolescents from immigrant families, being Asian or Latin American appears to include valuing education, postponing dating and other social activities, and believing in the importance of assisting and respecting one’s family.”

These sentiments were echoed by students across our study, as reflected in quotes from different focus groups.

“The research considers us successful because we made it to college. I think we wouldn’t be here without our parents. That’s just the bottom line. Our parents had so much personal drive and so much dedication to bring us to where we are now that there’s no way that we can take full credit for being where we are right now. They’re the ones who gave us the luxury to do all this stuff.” [Korean student]

“I think that's something else in the Turkish culture. You're very connected to your families, especially your parents. They took care of you all this time and now we have to do anything we can to kind of help back and they rely on us and they know that we will be there if anything and we know that they’ll be there.” [Turkish student]

These comments reflect strongly what Smith (2005) refers to as the “immigrant bargain” - parents sacrifice to bring their children to the U.S. and in return, children excel in school and make it to university. Some of the most emotional moments in the focus groups were when students talked about the sacrifices their parents had made.

One of the key values instilled in immigrant children is respect for their parents. Immigrant students feel strongly that given their parents’ sacrifices and all they have provided for them, this respect is fully warranted.

“And other than that, it’s just like other cultural aspects like the kind of - the way I would greet my father is different. I mean if I’m formal, say my father shows up, I’ll say maybe good morning and stuff, but if I was home and I woke up, I’d greet him in the Yoruba way with the respect that comes with it. Like a boy would have to prostrate - you don’t have to fully prostrate, but it’s like a sign of respect or you kneel down.” [Nigerian student]
“It’s almost like a sign of respect too. You’re respecting your parents. That’s, I think, that’s why sometimes my parents were so strict. It’s like you need to understand that I’m your parent. This is a respect. You need to understand that you’re my child.” [Latino student]

Immigrant students also reported that for much of their growing up, family was their main social network.

“I think one way that we kept our culture was just always having family around instead of friends. Like, for instance, I never had a birthday party with friends from school or anything until I was old enough - like high school or something. Before that, it was only - we were just around family.” [West Indian student]

As this student notes, one way that students kept their culture was through regular presence of extended family in their lives. This was true whether students grew up in ethnic enclaves or in more dispersed suburban communities. New Jersey’s small size and dense population made traveling to family events relatively easy.
Family is incredibly important to immigrant students at Rutgers, as is evidenced by the data and the quotes. This is clearly true across all the different ethnic groups. “Doing well for the family” and “Sacrificing for the family” are important values.

Students are less inclined to follow advice from family about college majors and friends, areas where they feel more autonomous.
When students are home they are expected to help as a member of the family. Students have most responsibility helping to care for family members, including taking family members to appointments where they need help with interpretation and explanation. African/Caribbean students have the most responsibility for helping around the house and caring for family members.

Latino students had somewhat more responsibility to help their families financially, reflecting the lower socioeconomic status of Latino families.
Introduction

If there was anything close to a universal across the focus groups, it was that higher education was not an option, but an expectation. In part, this was due to the broad sense that parents had sacrificed a great deal (separation from family, interruption of their own education, taking a job below their training and status in their home countries, working long hours and sometimes multiple jobs) to bring their children to the U.S. for better educational opportunities. For immigrant students and their parents, high educational aspirations are the driving force in their lives. These aspirations were echoed across the groups and are stated particularly poignantly by a Peruvian student.

“The reason why we came to this country was for us to study to have better schooling, so from the plane going from Peru to here, that was the very first things that I heard and even to this day, that’s the last things - like you have to keep on to school. You have to get an education. You have to do it. My father had a really nice job back in Peru and he gave that up and I saw how hard he was working because he had to take a very much lesser position here for us to come. So I know that there was a struggle. My mom was a stay-at-home mom in Peru and she had to start working and that was really hard for her too, but they always told me, like most parents do, we’re doing this so you can go to college, so you can be a professional, so you have to do it. So that’s the only reason, everything that drives them. [Peruvian student]

A similar sentiment was expressed by one of the Indian students.

“I think the big thing for me, my parents never actually rubbed it in my face, but you saw it, how much they missed their country. So a lot of what they said is we never got those opportunities when we were back there. So it was kind of like, it wasn’t a guilt factor expressed by them. But it was something that my sister and I felt growing up. We kind of knew they were living vicariously through us. And like they gave up so much so we would have these opportunities. So it’s not stress, I guess it was positive encouragement to do well!” [Indian student]

Across the focus groups, students reported that their parents have really high expectations not only for the final attainment of a college degree, but also for their performance in specific classes.

“My siblings and my parents and everyone push. You have to get the best grades. One time I was like, oh mom I got a 79. And she was like 79, what is that? Isn’t that like an F? And I’m, no mother, it’s almost a B. And she’s like, that’s not an A. And I’m like, thank you mother. Thank you for crushing my hard work. And they just want the best and I, when I came into school, I came in as a biochemical engineer. I was to be pre-med and I wanted to be a doctor.” [Italian student]
To the extent that they could, parents worked hard to motivate their children. When they had time with their children, they often focused on encouraging their learning.

“He’s very knowledgeable and ever since I was little he would give math problems in the summer. He would make me just do work all the time. Extra homework all the time so it’s always been okay. My school’s first and grades, they’re important. I need to get A’s, preferably 100.” [Nigerian student]

Not all parents had the educational skills to help at this level, but all shared this focus on motivating their children to do well in school. For the most part, students responded positively to this level of expectation, though for some it could be overwhelming at times. Some participants also felt constrained by their parents’ seemingly narrow conception of what were appropriate fields of study, with emphasis on traditional professional careers such as medicine and engineering.

In our study we found very high assessments of the importance of university education for success. This contrasts with previous studies of secondary school students where this level of desire for higher education was neither as universal nor as strong. This finding suggests that one factor that leads to successful attainment of university education is that students in our study internalized this value from their parents and made it their own.
Doing well at university is viewed as central to the lives of immigrant students. University education is seen as the vehicle for social mobility and as the reason behind the family’s immigration to the U.S.
Parents have very high educational aspirations for their children. The majority of parents not only expect students to graduate from university, but also recognize the importance of a professional degree for their children’s future.

Latino students’ parents focused more on having their children graduate from college than going on to professional school. This may be understood in light of the lower educational attainment of Latino parents in this study.
Students shared their parents’ high educational aspirations. The majority of participants expect to go on to graduate school.

- Medicine and other graduate degrees are highly valued by immigrant students.

- African/Caribbean students have the highest aspirations to get a doctorate; other groups emphasized attaining master’s degrees.
The following Recommendations come more from our discussions in the focus groups than from the questionnaire data. One portion of the focus group discussion was dedicated to identifying what schools, communities and Rutgers University could do to support children of immigrants to achieve higher education. The questionnaire provides data on the social and cultural capital immigrant students possess that support their educational aspirations.

The overarching recommendation of this report is to provide the resources and supports to transform the high educational aspirations of immigrant families and students into reality. For most of the students in our study, their families made it clear that attending university was not an option; it was the fulfillment of their families’ dreams in migrating to the U.S.

Collaborations among secondary schools, community leaders, and higher education institutions have the potential to bring together the skills and resources of these different groups to make the educational aspirations of immigrant students a reality.

**Secondary Schools and Communities**

*Enhance culturally competent support systems for successful transitions between secondary school and higher education.*

- Students and families can greatly benefit from workshops on the university application process: including, The Common Application/Rutgers application; SAT, AP and other tests; FAFSA and financial aid; application letters/essays; and support programs.
- New Jersey secondary schools can enhance students’ aspirations for higher education by exposing them to a larger and more diverse group of higher education institutions.
- Programs for parents that support participation in higher education and the application process starting early in secondary school can be extremely valuable. Even parents who attended higher education in their home countries find the U.S. system very different.
- There is a pressing need for programs that combat discrimination against immigrant students due to the range of factors identified in this Report. Based on focus group discussions, schools sometimes do not address these issues when they emerge in the school setting.
- Schools can identify models for ESL/ELL programs to make them more effective. Across many of the focus groups, students reported that they found ESL/ELL classes to be isolating and stigmatizing. Develop workshops to identify and implement best practices.

*Enhance community resources and capacities to integrate new arrivals into their communities and to build on the rich resources that a diverse community brings.*

- Communities can support the development of programs that combat discrimination against immigrants and enhance the integration of immigrants into U.S. society.
- Communities can encourage the expansion of “ethnic schools” as sources of language and cultural learning and enhancement of ethnic identity among immigrant students. Where these schools have arisen naturally out of ethnic communities, let them flourish. In communities without these resources, support the development of these kinds of programs.
Recommendations

Rutgers University

Continue support for and develop new curricular and co-curricular programs to enhance the experience of immigrant students at Rutgers. Many students feel like Rutgers’ pride in and emphasis on its diversity is very important. They also feel Rutgers already supports programs and organizations that enhance cultural diversity on campus, but could do more.

The following efforts at Rutgers are examples of these kinds of programs. This list is not meant to be comprehensive, but illustrative of the range of programs: Rutgers student cultural organizations; the Asian American Cultural Center, Center for Latino Arts and Culture, Global Village, and Paul Robeson Center; Department of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies and Africana Studies as well as the many Language Departments; programs that bring immigrant students to Rutgers, such as the Educational Opportunity Fund, Rutgers Future Scholars program and Upward Bound; programs that enhance readiness for graduate study, such as ODASIS, Project L/EARN and TRIO programs; programs at the Graduate School of Education, Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, and the Collaborative that focus on enhancing the experiences of immigrant students in public schools; and new student services, such as the Interfaith Prayer Rooms in Student Centers. Not all of these programs focus specifically on immigrant students, but many serve the needs of these students.

The following recommendations are intended to strengthen and expand curricular and co-curricular efforts to support immigrant students at Rutgers University.

- Enhance ethnic studies programs and formalize an Asian American Studies program on par with Africana Studies and Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies. These programs provide rich analytical understanding of the role of diversity in U.S. society and provide a context for immigrant students to study and learn about their experiences.
- Develop a Rutgers Global Ambassadors program to enlist immigrant students and cultural organizations in the recruitment of immigrant secondary students.
- Continue to develop special support services for immigrant and diverse students, such as the Interfaith Prayer Rooms recently opened in the student centers.
- Develop mentorship programs for entering immigrant students by pairing them with junior/senior students from immigrant backgrounds.
- Build on the impressive language diversity and skills of Rutgers immigrant students to develop a Global Language Network that could enhance the language learning experience at Rutgers, provide expanded services to the communities that surround Rutgers, and develop marketable services to business and industry.
- Support research and evaluation of programs to combat prejudice and discrimination against immigrants in American society.
- Develop scholarship programs to support the involvement of immigrant students in the activities recommended above, especially the mentoring and outreach efforts.
References


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