

# The American Campus: *Paying the price of induced diversity*

Review/Essay by David Simcox

*Immigration and Higher Education: Institutional Responses to Changing Demographics*  
by Maryann Jacobi Gray, Elizabeth Rolph  
and Elan Melamid

(Santa Monica, CA, 1996) Rand: Center for Research  
on Immigration Policy, 117 pages

Rand's 1996 report, *Immigration and Higher Education*, asks how the nation's colleges and universities are coping in the 1990s with the insistent policy and cultural issues accompanying their rising enrollments of immigrants.

The answer the reader distills from this study is that the proliferation of immigrants on the nation's campus has significantly magnified latent issues of public finance, group rights, intellectual rigor, diversity and balkanization, and the centrality of English in higher education — issues that now divide and confound college administrators and faculty. Rand makes it clear early on that, whatever it learns about the realities of the campus, it remains loyal to the principle of diversity as an end in itself and as an overriding imperative of American education.

Even so, the study, funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation, is remarkably candid in findings that some might see as politically incorrect. Rand's probing reveals a surprising and healthy realism within academe about limits — the recognition of the inherent trade-offs between expanding services to immigrants and meeting the needs of disadvan-

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tagged citizens, and the explosive political potential of these issues. A striking and related finding is that campuses are increasingly sensitive to the issue of "balkanization" and are reluctant to create programs that will further divide their students.

At the same time, the study confirms that a sizable segment of university leaders plays an advocacy role for immigrant interests, even to the extent of side-stepping federal and state laws and regulations that would limit student aid or preferential tuition rates to immigrants. An example: federal rules prohibit student aid for instruction in

English as a Second Language. Some university officials manage by restructuring language training to look like something else.

But the study also finds a solid consensus of skepticism among its respondents in academe on some of the received wisdom about immigrants. Many of the skeptics

feel that:

- immigrants are not needier than other disadvantaged populations such as African Americans and Hispanics, who often have less network support;
- specialized access programs for immigrants are of questionable appropriateness, given the extent of similar or worse disadvantages suffered by some American students;
- special care and feeding of immigrant students risks further fragmentation of campus life and, as one administrator put it, "raises consciousness that doesn't need to be raised" in the present anti-immigration political environment.
- As immigrant enrollments grow, or other competing demands on higher education increase, today's fairly "low level" strains may intensify. Rapid growth in the college age population in immigration-magnet states, coupled with declines in funding, portend a gap between the number of eligibles and

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the number of enrollment spaces that will reduce participation rates for all groups, particularly low and middle-income students.

### Background: Numbers and Study Methods

Sharing the national passion to see all immigrants as victims, the study early on states a presumption that immigrants are prone to being underserved in higher education because of the

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prevalence of minority status, poor English, and low incomes. Very basic census data not mentioned in the study, however, shows little evidence of victimhood for the newcomers in access to U.S. colleges and universities.

The 1990 Census showed 1.95 million foreign-born students enrolled in U.S. post-secondary schools. Some 1.5 million of them (77 percent) were in public institutions. About 1.3 million of the foreign-born students were non-citizens, with just under one million of them in publicly supported institutions.

The growth of the foreign-born population by about 5 million from 1990 to 1996, and a continued rise in the admissions of both immigrants and temporary foreign students, imply a total enrollment of non-citizens approaching 1.5 million in 1997. About 1.1 to 1.2 million are estimated to be in public institutions, at a cost to the states and some local governments of \$7.5 billion to \$8.0 billion, not including financial aid provided by government or by the universities themselves.

The percentage of the immigrant population attending colleges full or part-time in 1990 (9.9%) was twice that of college attendance in the native-born population (4.9%). High immigrant enrollment manifests the magnetic effect beyond our borders of

a relatively low-cost, easily accessible U.S. higher education, the larger proportion of the immigrant population of college age, and the dense concentration of immigrants in California, whose community college and state university systems are the nation's most accessible.

Rand bases its findings on case studies of 14 two- and four-year institutions with large enrollments of immigrants in five states of high immigrant settlement. The sample seems small and the choice of institutions raises questions of representation. All were large — over 14,000 students, all but one were public, and five were community colleges.

Regrettably, no institutions in Texas were studied, allegedly because of the unique issues posed by the huge Mexican immigrant and border commuter enrollment there. What seem compelling reasons for studying immigration's unique effects in that state somehow became reasons for *not* studying it. Mexicans are now the largest single nationality group enrolled in U.S. universities. The study's exclusion of Texas universities may well make the problems encountered and the public costs seem less acute than they really are.

Of the 210 interviews conducted at the 14 institutions, only 27 were with students, whose immigration status was not indicated. Revealing indeed would have been a sub-sample of at least fifty interviews with U.S.-born minority and white students on their perceptions of the needs and support systems of immigrants and the universities' responsibilities to them.

### Subsidizing 'Non-Permanent Resident' Students

Rand looked into the institutions' treatment of "Non-Permanent Resident Students" (an artful term for illegal aliens and asylum seekers), but declined to estimate numbers. Apparent from the interviews is an inclination among university officials to circumvent court decisions and state regulations denying residential tuition rates to non-permanent residents. Of the 13 public institutions studied, seven permitted non-permanent residents to qualify. Six did not.

Strongest advocates for the illegals and asylum seekers were the California community colleges, parts of the California State University system and, of course, the City University of New York (CUNY). A common approach of administrators was simply

not to acknowledge the presence of illegals, or to define them out of existence. The California Community Colleges in 1992 counted only 14,000 undocumented students in 1992, out of a total enrollment of 1.5 million. The California State system in 1993 said only 500 of its 360,000 were undocumented. One California official described college officials' approach as "don't ask, don't tell."

Estimates of illegal alien enrollment are rare because most pro-immigration researchers prefer to downplay the cost issue. Urban Institute's 1994 study for the Clinton administration on the fiscal impacts of the undocumented<sup>1</sup> ignored the costs of higher education. Dr. Donald Huddle of Rice University estimated in 1994 that about 210,000 illegal aliens were in public higher education, at an annual cost to the public of \$2.6 billion.

In general, the study shows little concern among university management about the overall public costs of U.S. academe's ministry to the newcomers. Administrators, however, did acknowledge that immigrant students required more costly, labor-intensive procedures in matters of admissions (particularly in dealing with overseas transcripts), student aid, special support, and English as a Second Language. In a note of fiscal sanity, only a few respondents admitted believing immigration should be encouraged because it keeps enrollments high.

### **A Major Gap: Non-Immigrant Foreign Students Omitted**

Immigrants in the study were defined as those foreign-born who are permanent residents or on the track to permanent residence, such as refugees. Although now numbering nearly 500,000 nationally, foreign students on temporary "non-immigrant" visas were not considered in the study, since their needs and support systems are supposedly different.

Their exclusion reduces the study's validity as a measure of the "tensions" our universities are up against. About forty percent of non-immigrant students will ultimately settle in the United States. Many come with the intention of staying and choose their fields according to the needs of the U.S. labor market, not those back home.

Most work in the United States while studying, often in disregard of the 20-hour a week limit. Many avail themselves of affirmative action and other programs for the disadvantaged. College faculty

and administrators must adjust to their language deficiencies and cultural incompatibilities no less than with green card holders.

Non-immigrant students lobby, form pressure groups, and involve themselves in U.S. politics.

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Reminders are the violent demonstrations of Iranian students in 1979 in several U.S. cities against U.S. support for the Shah of Iran. Latino students in California demonstrated and campaigned against Proposition 187 in 1994. Immigrant students at City University of New York, whose enrollment is 50 percent non-citizen, have demonstrated against tuition increases and city and state cut-backs in remedial education, and even against the 1996 welfare reforms.

Many of the legal immigrants addressed in this study were once temporary non-immigrant international students. David North has documented the common progression of the foreign student from his entry as a temporary non-immigrant, through conversion to permanent residence status based on marriage or an employer's petition, to U.S. citizenship. Along the way, the foreign student, according to observers such as North, gets a subtle preference from university officials for campus jobs, assistantships, and special university aid because the non-immigrant student lacks the access of the permanent resident or citizen students to Federal student loans and full-time off-campus employment.<sup>2</sup>

### **Student Aid: Immigrants Not Deprived**

One troubling irony not mentioned in Rand's report is David North's finding that for university students "the further you are from U.S. citizenship the more likely you are to secure funding from

American sources.” North's numbers show resident alien graduate students receiving an average of 18 percent more funding from federal and university sources than U.S. citizens, and non-immigrant foreign students receiving 20 percent more. The citizen student is more likely to fund his education with loans, a financial burden that often discourages advanced graduate training.

The Rand study finds tension and confusion among U.S. university administrators over such presumed disadvantages of immigrant students as access to student aid. Interviews revealed a perception of immigrant students as more aggressive than

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natives in securing financial aid, generally turning out first for “first come — first served” aid offerings — to the resentment of native-born students.

While immigrant students complain that language problems and cultural unfamiliarity impede their access to aid, college administrators note that disadvantaged U.S. students face the same impediments, but with less network and institutional support. In 1993, the National Center for Education Statistics reported Federal aid to foreign graduate and undergraduate students of \$1.3 billion, about \$2900 per student.

Irrational public finance incentives are part of the problem. While each immigrant student costs the public between \$5000 to \$10,000 a year (more in graduate and professional schools), the enrolling public universities don't feel much of those costs. Indeed, in most states the universities receive a per capita subsidy from the state for each additional student enrolled. Public universities have generally opposed “three-tier” tuition plans that would impose higher tuition on students from abroad who are not state residents than on U.S. citizen non-residents.

Disadvantaged Immigrants or Immigrants versus the Disadvantaged?

Rand's researchers find there are “pivotal, unresolved tensions facing the higher education sector” in connection with the large and diverse immigrant presence on campus. Looming large among those tensions is a complex of questions stemming from the growing campus diversity, such as entitlement of immigrants to blanket “disadvantaged” status and to special support programs, as well as the displacement of truly disadvantaged native minorities from racially-based support programs by more gifted immigrants. The study notes:

*Displacement may occur either within or between ethnic groups. An example of the former is the possibility ... that programs designed to recruit and enroll African-American students are increasingly serving Caribbean immigrants. On some campuses special admissions programs intended to provide access for a small number of promising students whose grades or test scores fall below official criteria are increasingly servicing Asian immigrants with low verbal but high quantitative scores rather than the intended native-born students (p.100).*

Defining disadvantage primarily by racial and ethnic attributes has proved unfair even to some disadvantaged immigrant students belonging to groups presumed to be advantaged. The study found cases of underperforming Asian students excluded from special help programs because of a general presumption that Asians excelled, and of white Eastern European refugees with weak educational background turned away because they were not a racial minority. Another ambiguity is the presence, in the same group, of native-born students and immigrants with strong backgrounds.

Fragmenting the Fragmented

Academe's diagnosis of the confusion: the existing categories are too broad or inaccurately defined. The answer: create sub-groups to accommodate the many intra-race, intra-cultural differences in dispensing entitlements.

Even academic leaders interviewed recognize this approach as awkward at best, and at worst even more balkanizing. There are scores of cultures and ethnicities represented on U.S. college

campuses. At some point, the study notes, the ability of the college to make sense of multiple categories of data and respond appropriately to each group's needs breaks down. The study does not consider the difficulties in just classifying and assigning individuals to their proper sub-groups.

Consider the possible gradations of disadvantage among students from Mexico alone: Indian, Mestizo, Caucasian? Regional origin, the backward south or advanced north? Income level, and how to certify it? If the student is Indian, does he speak Spanish or a pre-Columbian dialect? Or what about his tribal origin — Mixtec, Toltec or Tarahumaran, and the tribe's relative degree of deprivation? ... and so forth down the high road to Babel.

#### Is English Becoming Optional in U.S. Higher Education?

The proliferation of immigrants poses what would seem to have been a well settled question: Is mastery of the English language important in "under-graduate" education? (The framing of the question apparently assumes — probably unsoundly — that mastery of English is accepted as essential in *graduate* education).

Academics are divided by the competing values of high quality educational standards on one hand and universal access on the other. A policy vacuum is the result. Relatively few faculty members are able or willing to adjust their teaching styles to the needs of students with limited English proficiency or to hold back those students who fail to overcome it. Many felt that student's language deficiencies were not their problems.

Still, respondents deplored the mixed message immigrant students are getting about writing skills. Some observed that the value of a Baccalaureate degree was degraded when students with weak language skills receive diplomas and enter the job market. But equally strong was a fear of seeming unfair, of appearing "anti-immigrant" in mandating competency tests or remedial language training for

under-prepared immigrants.

Lacking firm guidance, individual professors often deal with the language problem in their own ways, by requiring their own competency tests or discouraging students with weak English from the more demanding courses. The study uncovered the case of a chemistry professor who required a "safety test" of all students enrolling in his laboratory courses. The safety test, for which he was admonished, was really a test of the students' ability to read and understand basic instructions about laboratory hazards.

English language deficiency nurtures other handicaps of immigrant students: lack of test-taking skills, awkwardness with multiple choice exams, and inability to meet the time limits on essay-type tests. Asian students often deal with these problems by choosing courses that minimize language skills, increasing their isolation in scientific fields.

#### Cultural Incompatibilities

Rand's respondents took note of some immigrant students' cultural *impedimenta* that make them resistant to some of the central values of western education. Among these is a preference for learning based on memorization of facts in contrast to U.S. professors' expectation of critical analysis and class participation.

Some immigrant values, such as familism and ethnocentricity, contributed to campus fragmentation. One is the gravitation toward certain specific majors, according to ethnicity. Some immigrants shun participation in extra-curricular activities because their families encourage them to restrict contacts to persons of the same culture or ethnicity.

Even in reluctantly participating in "co-curricular" affairs, immigrants are often found to select those activities that limit contact to those of the same culture or ethnicity. According to some academics, immigrants' strong commitment to family and culture puts them at odds with a central value and intent of Western education: training the student to become a critical thinking autonomous individual.

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### Denial as Public Policy

Rand concludes that problems of immigrant students don't have high priority on campus. Education leaders avoid dealing with them, concerned they will engender conflict or political embarrassment. Given growing anti-immigrant sentiments, the study finds, campus efforts to address immigrant student needs are likely to lead to policies or procedures than are more restrictive — an outcome that is anathema to academe. The situation on campuses, Rand's respondents note, mirrors the “division” over immigration in American society.

The universities' response to high immigration displays a defensiveness rooted in the notion of academic autonomy, even in taxpayer-supported institutions: openly dealing with the issue, they suggest, could invite “negative publicity” and bring on the intervention of “outside policy makers.”

The Rand study concludes that while immigration's strains on academe are still not a crisis, left unaddressed they are likely to increase and bring on intervention by state legislators or other outside policy makers — presumably the worst fear of university administrators.

They have reason to be concerned. Many of the very issues identified by Rand are increasingly hot nationally, partaking of current controversies over affirmative action, rising costs of public education, language unity, and shrinking voter commitment to public assistance for immigrants. The future of

American education and its predominant language, the opportunities for young Americans, and the fiscal health of public institutions are simply too important to be left to academicians.

The title Rand chose for this study is revealing: it characterizes the burgeoning immigrant population as just a matter of “changing demographics,” no one's responsibility really and no more subject to political management than today's weather. Universities may complain about some of the costs of diversity, but their behavior consistently confirms that they prefer the large foreign enrollments and, publicly-supported universities in particular, strive to keep it that way.

“Getting the best” is the justificatory slogan for academe's zest for high immigration. But “changing demographics” are not acts of God, they are the result of explicit political choices to act or to acquiesce. New demographics can emerge from new and different political choices. **TSC**

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Clark and Jeffrey Passel (1994), *Fiscal Impacts of Undocumented Aliens: Selected Estimates for Seven States*, Washington: The Urban Institute.

<sup>2</sup> David North (1994), *Soothing the Establishment: The Impact of Foreign-Born Scientists and Engineers on America*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

