

Foreign-Born and Immigrant-Origin Leadership in U.S. Universities

Educational Overview

Introduction

Universities in the United States are led by a range of administrators such as presidents, chancellors, provosts, and deans. Researchers studying leadership in higher education often examine whether these leaders are **U.S.-born or immigrants**, and whether they are **first-generation immigrants (foreign-born)** or **second-generation immigrants (U.S.-born children of immigrants)**.

Understanding these statistics can help provide context about leadership pipelines, global academic mobility, and how universities recruit talent.

Key Definitions

First-generation immigrant

A person **born in another country who later immigrated to the United States**.

Second-generation immigrant

A person **born in the United States with at least one parent born outside the United States**.

Immigrant-origin

A combined category including **both first-generation and second-generation immigrants**.

Share of Immigrant-Origin University Leaders

Research examining **hundreds of U.S. colleges and universities** shows that immigrant-origin individuals make up a noticeable but minority portion of top leadership.

Approximate Distribution of U.S. University Presidents

| Leadership Background | Estimated Share |
|---|-----------------|
| U.S.-born to U.S.-born parents | ~80% |
| First-generation immigrants (foreign-born) | ~15% |

| Leadership Background | Estimated Share |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Second-generation immigrants | ~8% |
| Total immigrant-origin leadership | ~20%+ |

This means **roughly one out of every five** university presidents or chancellors has immigrant origins, while about four out of five are U.S.-born without immigrant parentage.

Example Dataset

One analysis of **over 600 U.S. colleges and universities** found:

- **173 leaders were first-generation immigrants (foreign-born)**
- **47 leaders were second-generation immigrants**

Together they represented **about 20% of university presidents and chancellors** in that sample.

Comparison: Faculty vs Leadership

Immigrant representation is often **higher among university faculty** than among university leadership.

Typical Estimates

| Category | Approximate Share Foreign-Born |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| University Presidents | ~10–15% |
| University Faculty (overall) | ~20–30% |
| STEM Faculty | ~30–40% in some fields |

Fields such as engineering, mathematics, computer science, and physics tend to have **higher levels of international recruitment**.

Why Immigrant Representation Appears in Higher Education

Several factors contribute to immigrant participation in university leadership and faculty roles:

1. Global academic labor markets

Universities frequently recruit internationally for specialized expertise.

2. Graduate education pathways

Many international students complete PhDs in the United States and later pursue academic careers.

3. Research specialization

Some scientific and technical disciplines have historically drawn large numbers of international scholars.

4. Academic mobility

Universities often value experience at institutions across different countries.

Broader Context: Immigrant-Origin Students

Immigrant-origin students make up a significant portion of higher education enrollment.

U.S. Higher Education Students

| Student Category | Approximate Share |
|--|-------------------|
| First-generation immigrants (foreign-born) | ~11% |
| Second-generation (children of immigrants) | ~22% |
| Total immigrant-origin students | ~33% |

This means **about one-third of students in U.S. higher education have immigrant backgrounds.**

Key Takeaways

- **First-generation immigrants account for roughly 15% of university presidents.**
 - **Total immigrant-origin leadership (first + second generation) is about 20%+.**
 - **Immigrant representation is generally higher among faculty than among leadership.**
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