

Examining the Outlook of First-Generation Students at the University of Arizona — Second-Generation Immigrants' Views on American Identity, Privilege, and Belonging

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Little research exists regarding the demographic of first-generation undergraduate college students who are children of immigrants. A first-generation undergraduate student is someone whose parents have not attained a four-year college or university degree. The outlook of second-generation immigrants on education and the world as a whole may be very different from those of their parents, which is why I took a particular interest in learning from individuals of this demographic. The goal of this study is to gain a well-rounded understanding of the experiences of first-generation undergraduate students who are second-generation immigrants regarding their identity, views on American privilege, and sense of belonging in the United States and at the University of Arizona. This study defines “first-generation” as undergraduate students who are the first in their immediate family to attend any form of college in the United States. The result of this study intends to inform the student body and faculty at the University of Arizona about first-generation college students’ sense of belonging and views on American identity. The responses from this study will benefit the University of Arizona community and help improve the University’s outreach and support to students of this demographic.

Introduction

Segmented assimilation theory is a sociological perspective that examines the process of immigrant integration and assimilation into a new society (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). The theory suggests that the immigrant experiences in a new society are diverse and can be understood through different pathways of assimilation. Segmented assimilation theory has identified three distinct integration trajectories into U.S. society among the children of immigrants: incorporation into the dominant mainstream, downward integration into the so-called “underclass,” and upward social mobility coupled with ethnic preservation (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). One strength of segmented assimilation theory is that it considers the role of various contextual, geographical, political, familial, structural, and cultural factors in noncitizens’ integration trajectories into the United States. School experiences, as highlighted by scholars like Portes and Zhou (1993) and Portes and Rumbaut (2001), are among the factors shaping the assimilation outcomes of immigrants in the U.S. However, there is little differentiation regarding the impact of these factors on children of immigrants who are first-generation college students. An emerging body of literature found that an increasing share of members of ethnoracial groups, particularly Asian Americans and Latinos, identify primarily on pan-ethnic terms such as Mexican American, Chinese American, or simply as “American” (Martinez and Gonzalez 2021; Jang et al. 2022). Research in this area finds that primary pan-ethnic identification is often a result of perceived discrimination, marginalization, and feelings of alienation from mainstream American society. Finally, there is evidence that college campuses are

important sites of identity formation among young adults, particularly Latino and Asian American students (Reyes 2018). Drawing on these three bodies of scholarship, I aim to gain a better understanding of the perceptions and lived experiences of first-generation college students who are children of immigrants. Specifically, I will be examining the relationships between students' 1) understanding of "American privilege" and interpretation of how American identity shapes their assimilation, 2) sense of belonging on a college campus, and 3) long-term career goals and aspirations. I will examine these relationships by conducting 30-minute interviews with first-generation college students who are the children of immigrants at the University of Arizona.

Acculturation, Power & Integration

In my research, I will focus mostly on topics concerning acculturation, assimilation, and integration into United States society. To best grasp the responses of the interviewees, we must develop an understanding of these terms. Acculturation, assimilation, and integration are three distinct concepts. Acculturation occurs when one culture socializes a group to normalities within the dominant culture. For example, in the United States, immigrants socialize using "school behaviors, and skills and rituals characteristic of much of White American society" (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). Acculturation is the initial process of adopting elements from a new culture, and it is often a precursor to assimilation, where individuals or groups fully integrate into the dominant cultural norms and values. Over time, whilst assimilating to the "dominant" culture, individuals lose sight of minority cultural and heritage values (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). Conversely, integration occurs when an individual identifies equally with the culture of their heritage and host country. The concept of integration is not always linear towards assimilation as it is often affected by different contingencies, such as one's ethnic or racial background, location, and human capital (Telles, Ortiz, & Moore, 2008). Integration and assimilation are not necessarily mutually exclusive; rather, they are interconnected processes, with integration representing a broader spectrum of cultural incorporation and assimilation being a potential outcome within that spectrum. Integration can involve the coexistence of diverse cultural elements, and while it may lead to assimilation for some individuals, it is not an inevitable or singular trajectory for everyone. The research encompassed in this paper examines the concepts of acculturation and integration with an emphasis on assimilation. There are three main theories of assimilation: (1) straight-line (classic) assimilation theory, (2) segmented assimilation theory, and (3) new assimilation theory.

Straight-Line/Classic Assimilation Theory

Assimilation occurs when an individual develops a stronger identification with the culture of a new country, surpassing their connection to their cultural heritage. The straight-line or classic assimilation theory proposes that as individuals develop relationships with the dominant culture in a society, they gradually lose touch with their ethnic cultural elements (Lash, 2018). In American society, straight-line assimilation is characterized by the adoption of American cultural practices and societal norms by United States immigrants, coupled with the loss of ties to their heritage cultures. American sociologist and a primary scholar in classic assimilation theory, Milton Gordon, uses straight-line assimilation theory to explain the upward mobility of successive immigrant generations due to the adoption of primary-group relationships and the incorporation of mainstream social networks and institutions (Gordon, 1964). This research project seeks to examine the validity of classical assimilation theory in the context of undergraduate college students.

Segmented Assimilation Theory

The segmented assimilation theory helps describe the diverse

paths immigrant populations may follow while adapting to American culture. There is no one way to assimilate and adapt to a society. Groups of immigrants assimilate into a variety of sectors in American society (Portes and Zhou, 1993). Because of the diversity within American society and the diversity of immigrants to America, "the process of growing up in America oscillates between smooth acceptance and traumatic confrontation depending on the characteristics that immigrants and their children bring along and the social context that receives them" (Portes and Zhou, 1993). There are three main categories of segmented assimilation that immigrant populations are known to experience: (1) "Growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle-class," (2) "opposite direction into permanent poverty and assimilation into the lower class," and (3) "rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and tight solidarity" (Portes and Zhou, 1993). It is important to understand these different modes of incorporation into society when attempting to understand the diversity in types of assimilation immigrant populations may face. Different ethnic and racial groups approach assimilation differently. The assimilation process varies depending on how individuals decide to embrace American ways (Portes and Zhou, 1993). Not all immigrants assimilate into society in the same manner. Some immigrant populations in the United States are vulnerable to downward assimilation into the lower class particularly because of their skin color, geographic location, or absence of mobility leaders to help incorporate them into upper-class society (Portes and Zhou, 1993). Particularly, when immigrating to the United States, "the expectation is that the foreign-born and their offspring will first acculturate and then seek entry and acceptance among the native-born as a prerequisite for their social and economic advancement" (Portes and Zhou, 1993). If immigrant populations do not assimilate and seek acceptance into American culture, they risk confinement to the lower classes (Portes and Zhou, 1993). Upon seeking acceptance into American society, many immigrants thoroughly assimilate into American culture by compromising their cultural heritage – as assimilation to American society is sometimes easier than grasping onto one's heritage culture (Portes and Zhou, 1993). However, as stated above, this pattern is not the case for all immigrants. Some immigrant groups, particularly young immigrants, remain connected to their cultural heritage, and ethnic communities and often "have a better chance for educational and economic mobility through the use of the material and social capital that their communities make available" (Portes and Zhou, 1993). The relationship between strong ties to one's native culture and adaptation to mainstream American society is another aspect this project seeks to explore.

New Assimilation Theory

New assimilation theory is a modified version of the classical and segmented assimilation theories and suggests that assimilation is characterized by structural integration into a society, rather than the adoption of mainstream culture and norms of that society (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). This theory suggests that a group's integration into society is influenced by a variety of factors and cannot be explained by one theory or specific trajectory. It acknowledges the continuous contribution of immigrant groups to American "mainstream" society, highlighting a reciprocal process where immigrants shape American society as much as American society reshapes them. While some immigrants may completely give up their cultural heritage, others actively bring their cultural elements into the new country, contributing to a nuanced understanding of assimilation dynamics. As a result, the current societal landscape in the United States is undergoing constant transformation, foreseeing a significantly different future.

Assimilation and Education

Factors such as socioeconomic and immigration status hinder assimilation and give rise to social and economic inequalities among immigrant populations. Some leading analysts "[that believe] in the

universality of assimilation, argue that [these inequalities] are the result of a large first- and second-generation population still adjusting to American society” (Telles, Ortiz, & Moore, 2008). A primary factor affecting immigrant populations' assimilation is the education level. One study asserts that “Mexican Americans are especially slow to assimilate because the immigrant generation has had especially low levels of education and other forms of human capital compared with other immigrant groups” (Telles, Ortiz, & Moore, 2008). The focus on the education levels of immigrant populations, specifically second-generation undergraduate college students, is driven not only by personal interest but also by the significance of understanding the unique challenges this demographic faces.

Much of assimilation into American culture is the attainment of a collegiate education (Reyes 2018). Educational institutions across the country influence undergraduate students in different ways due to factors such as the campus location, campus life and culture, and the opportunities provided to students on campus (such as course offerings, scholarships, and faculty support). However, “some consequences of institutional differences are distinct outcomes on several measures, including students’ identities, their sense of who they are, their collective action behaviors, and their ideas about inequality and opportunity in America” (Reyes 2018). The interviews in this paper will examine the collegiate experience of various first-generation undergraduate students who are second-generation immigrants specific to the culture and opportunities provided at the University of Arizona. The University of Arizona is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) committed to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for Hispanic and Latino students. This recognition is achieved by having a student population where at least 25% identify as Hispanic. As an HSI, The University of Arizona promotes its programs and initiatives that enhance the educational experience and success of its Hispanic students. Studies show that “historically underrepresented students’ sense of belonging is influenced by campus racial climate, which in turn is a part of the institution’s overall normative arrangements” (Reyes 2018). Understanding the impact of these factors on the experiences of second-generation immigrants is essential to address the broader dynamics of inclusion within the collegiate setting. A university’s ‘racial climate’ generally shapes students’ interactions with each other both in academic and non-academic settings. This study seeks to understand the dynamics of interactions among first-generation undergraduate students who are children of immigrants at the University of Arizona. It delves into the complexity of whether these interactions, involving peers, professors, or other students, exhibit predominantly positive or negative aspects.

American Identity and Nationalism

This research project also will dive deeply into the respondent’s perspectives on American identity and nationalism. Nationalism is a concept regarding “the effort by a people to determine their own destiny and free themselves from external constraint, to overcome internal divisions and unite, and to express their sense of themselves and their cultural heritage” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). It coincides with the common conception of American identity associated with various freedoms such as the freedom of speech, religion, and expression (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). Nationalism is typically tied to the ethnic and racial identities of various societal groups (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). These identities blur when incorporating nationalism in a general sense into American identity, particularly concerning the cultural and heritage ties of immigrant populations in the United States. This specific context emphasizes the unique challenges and complexities immigrants face as they navigate the dynamics of national belonging while preserving their distinct cultural backgrounds.

The United States is a diverse country home to individuals who identify with various cultures, ethnicities, and racial groups. The United States has engaged in “more than two centuries of effort to

construct a surprisingly widespread sense of peoplehood among an ethnically and racially diverse population” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). However, with this effort comes disagreements from people arguing that “ethnic ties have been replaced ... by political commitments... in what has come to be called ‘civic nationalism’” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). The political culture of the United States has a strong hold on the citizens who live here and is a seed of solidarity. The lasting impact of the United States' political culture is seen in citizens' active engagement in democratic processes, shaping the culture from local initiatives to national elections, while transcending individual differences through shared values and ideals. This fosters collective responsibility and solidarity, encouraging collaboration in the commitment to the nation's democratic principles. However, the political practices and values in the United States extending into educational institutions conflict with the racial identities of many resident populations (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). The United States has “stumbled repeatedly over its reluctance to include various non-White populations in the peoplehood it imagines and over its insistence that they accept a European heritage as their own ” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). Individuals who come to the United States from other countries are often forced to assimilate into American culture by adopting new cultural norms and succumbing to the identity of American nationalism. Research shows that “no matter how open, accessible, and principled they appear, civic forms of nationalism almost inevitably privilege – or come to privilege – certain cultural or ethnic forms and practices, even certain ancestries, over others” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). The individual identities of first-generation students at the University of Arizona are notably influenced by the United States, particularly in the context of nationalism impacting various aspects of their lives, including their experiences within social institutions such as the school systems.

Data and Methods

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

Gender	
Male	1
Female	4
Non-Binary	1
Age	
19	1
20	3
21	1
25	1
Class Standing	
Freshman	-
Sophomore	2
Junior	3
Senior	1
Ethnicity	
Polish	1
Hispanic	4
White	1
Country of Familial Origin	
Mexico	4
Poland	1
Brazil & Portugal	1
Socioeconomic Status	
Working poor	2
Lower class	2
Middle class	2
Upper class	-

From January 2023 to May 2023, I interviewed six first-generation undergraduate students at the University of Arizona, all of whom are second-generation immigrants. The participants' were renamed as follows: Sarah, Olivia, Matt, Chloe, Michelle, and Anna. I advertised my research project using flyers in my classes and on social media. Students interested in participating contacted me for an interview. This project was filed with and approved by the Institutional Review Board. The interviews, which each lasted approximately 30 minutes, were conducted in person, over Zoom, or by phone and consisted of the same series of questions attached in the appendix of this paper. The carefully crafted interview questions intend to delve into participants' backgrounds, understanding of "American privilege", sense of belonging on a college campus, and their long-term career goals and aspirations, and to provide a comprehensive exploration of their experiences and perspectives. The audio of each interview was recorded and transcribed. I used a qualitative approach to analyze each interview and to draw comparisons across responses. All data and responses are kept completely confidential to maintain participant confidentiality identification.

The participants interviewed spanned the ages of 19 to 25 years old identifying as male, female, and non-binary. The interview encompassed both traditional (first-time) and non-traditional (second-time or transfer) undergraduate students. Participants identified as white, Polish, or Hispanic and traced their ancestry back to Poland, Brazil, Portugal, or Mexico. There were four socioeconomic classes represented by the participants: working poor, lower class, middle class, or upper class.

Integration in US Society

As first-generation college students who are children of immigrants, many participants believe that integrating into the United States simply means fitting into the United States and American society. This could mean having stability (e.g. financial, personal, relationship), owning a home, and having a standard 9-5 job — a critical aspect underscored by interviewees, revealing the absence of such privileges in certain immigrant families. One participant noted how her family lacks the privilege of a set schedule that accompanies the stability of a 9-5 job; their schedule varies depending on the type of work their parents are offered.

Another participant, Sarah whose mother immigrated from Poland, remarked that "we [herself and her family] think of the United States as the American Dream." Sarah explains that she believes immigrants come from all over the world to America for this very reason; the hope of obtaining a life of freedom and opportunity to work and build a comfortable life for themselves and their family. Reflecting this, an immigrant's perspective on the United States diverges significantly from the general view of immigration held by the broader U.S. population. Furthermore, Sarah highlighted the acculturation experience of her mother, who, upon relocating to the United States, adopted a nickname due to the difficulty Americans faced in pronouncing her given first name. Her mother felt compelled to adopt an Americanized pronunciation for her name to assimilate into American culture. In Sarah's opinion,

"People in America expect you to come here and leave your culture behind. They expect you to assimilate into 'American culture' or whatever that is. When immigrants come to America, [the American society] does not like it when you keep your culture. They would rather you be a white American."

Sarah's interpretation of assimilation into American culture follows a classic and straight-line assimilation theory approach by adopting American culture whilst abandoning one's cultural heritage. The research within this project shows how students such as Sarah view the United States as a country that disregards racial and cultural practices that are not 'white.' Despite this disregard, some immigrants hold on to the hope of the American Dream seeking better futures for their families as explained by other

students. Other students when asked for their outlook on integration into the United States' society reflected on their experiences. For example, another participant, Michelle, noted that growing up in America, her life at home was always different from that of her peers. She stated that she was raised with different beliefs and traditions than most other kids and, as a result, was tasked with navigating the differences between her home culture and that of the wider American society. Michelle found particular difficulties in navigating the American school system because her parents were unable to help her work through the process.

Next, participants were asked whether or not they believed that their family had fully integrated into the US society. Most participants felt they had fully integrated into the US society and lost significant ties to their heritage culture. The participants also noted it is their parents and grandparents who retain the traditions, culture, and language of their home country. It can be inferred that as the generations progress in America, fewer students keep ties to their ancestral countries. However, in some cases, the students believed their families integrated into the US society to jobs and the safety and comfort of living here, but have not integrated in a cultural sense. Other students mentioned they believe their families have fully integrated into the United States society simply because all family members have United States citizenship and/or their passport says they are American citizens.

One student, Chloe, stated that she does not believe she has integrated into the United States society because she and her parents struggle with a language barrier. According to her, she and her family will always be in situations where they do not understand something or they are not understood. Furthermore, her family does not celebrate many American holidays or traditions, such as Independence Day.

Cultural and Social Barriers

Participants were then asked what if any, cultural or social barriers they face daily as first-generation college students and children of immigrants. The most influential barriers that most participants admitted to facing are economic and language barriers. The economic status of participants' families affected their financial aid and whether they needed to work. Furthermore, scholarships and financial aid often act as stressors for these students — particularly non-traditional students who do not qualify for as many scholarships as they did their first time in college. As a non-traditional student returning to college for the second time, Michelle explained how "[she] did not qualify for many scholarships because [she] is a non-traditional student this time around." In regards to language barriers, some students find that speaking two languages presents a challenge and sometimes do not consider themselves fluent in either language. Participants described problems communicating with peers, professors, and advisors and understanding subject matter in their second language which is often English. The language barriers coupled with unfamiliarity with the school system in the United States pose significant challenges for this demographic of students.

When asked about cultural barriers, Sarah responded that she does not face many barriers because, racially, she identifies as white. However, ethnically, she feels as though there are many aspects of her culture that others do not understand. In social settings, she often hears discriminatory remarks about her culture. Such comments may be indicative of implicit biases and microaggressions that are persistent in society and further pronounced in a college campus environment. This aligns with segmented assimilation theory, underscoring the impact of discriminatory attitudes on individuals from immigrant backgrounds as they navigate diverse societal contexts, including higher education settings.

Defining American Identity and Privilege

Following that, participants were asked several questions relating to American privilege and American identity. First, participants were asked to describe what it means to be an American and whether they

identify as American. According to Michelle, being an American comes with an understanding of how American society works. Michelle stated that “the way that the society, the people, the interactions, the economy, the way things work [in America] are just different.”

In her interview, Sarah stated that, in her opinion, being American means freedom, but they also recognized the pros and cons of the term. For example, immigrants in America may enjoy new opportunities and privileges by becoming American, but these opportunities are often limited in terms of access to certain resources, socioeconomic mobility, and full societal inclusion. Sarah explained that freedom means many different things to different people; some social classes enjoy greater freedom than others. Another student, Olivia, stated that being “American” means being able to “work for the things you want and to try and get a better future for the next generation.” One participant, Chloe, simply believes that being American means being born on American land whilst having legal status in America without the fear of deportation. One participant considered themselves “more American” than their parents solely because they are American citizens and their parents are not.

Transitioning from the participants' descriptions of “being American” to their identification as American, students are shaped by various factors, including upbringing, legal status, and personal connections to the concept of American identity. The four of the students interviewed identify as Americans because they were born and raised in America. One participant, Matt, said, “Yes, [I identify as American] because that is what my passport says. I trace my roots back to Mexico but, in the end, I am American.”

One student, Michelle, identifies both as American and with their country of origin. Michelle explained:

“I identify as Brazilian American. When I was little, I really wanted to hold on to being Brazilian because I got taken away from that, so I never had the full opportunity to become Brazilian. But the older I get, the more that I realize that I can be Brazilian in some aspects but I am more used to the American life, but at the same time, I still have those Brazilian values that were passed down to me. I would never say that I am just American. I would always say that I am Brazilian American.”

Most participants' answers are consistent with existing research on how a growing proportion of multicultural individuals identify themselves primarily with pan-ethnic terms as opposed to identifying with their country of national origin (Martinez and Gonzalez, 2021). On the other hand, two participants do not identify as American. In her interview, Chloe answered:

“I don't consider myself American. When being asked about my identity I always say Mexican because I have grown up with all of the values and the Mexican culture... versus someone who grew up [in America] and whose parents are from here. I have always just considered myself Mexican.”

Chloe's answer reflects a sense of pride in their identity which ties into the concept of nationalism and preservation of one's cultural heritage (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). After discussing their identity, participants were questioned about what “American privilege” means to them. Three participants' answered that privilege comes with being born in America and raised within American culture, with Michelle stating:

“In the US, we have a lot of luxuries that are not granted to others in other countries. Like the ability to say and think about what we are feeling and the ability to practice whatever religion. Even the ability to walk in public with your phone out. Americans live in a bubble. As Americans, we grow up in a relatively safe world. We can walk around with relative safety and relative flexibility to be who we are. And I think that is a privilege of being an American.”

Unlike immigrants who might face challenges with language barriers and pronunciation, American-born individuals generally do not encounter such difficulties. Being raised in America comes along with learning American slang and ways of speaking that non-native Americans may not know. Sarah noted how members of her family would be profiled as “non-American” simply by the way they

pronounced certain words. Stereotypes created by language barriers reinforce harmful assumptions, perpetuate exclusionary narratives, and can subject individuals to biased treatment and discrimination.

Furthermore, participants explained that being an American provides the privilege of being able to work and study in the United States without encountering any difficulties such as obtaining citizenship or paperwork authorizing them to do so. Another participant, Matt, stated that “if one works hard enough, one will be able to enjoy the privileges that come along with living in America.” The most common theme among responses to this question was that participants associate American privilege with easy access to advantages such as education or work opportunities. Most participants agree that Americans overlook the everyday transactions they consider normal, such as financial transactions and access to opportunities, without realizing that many other people worldwide lack such privileges and struggle socioeconomically to attain such opportunities.

A Sense of Belonging at the University of Arizona

To understand experiences at the University of Arizona, participants were asked about their sense of belonging on campus — specifically whether they found a group, organization, or space on campus in which they developed a sense of comfort and community. Some participants remarked they normally feel comfortable at the University of Arizona because of its diverse student body population. As of August 2023, the undergraduate student body at the University of Arizona is 27.4% Hispanic and Latinx students which is the second largest demographic on the University of Arizona's campus behind the 67.7% of white students. Furthermore, the undergraduate student body is also composed of 9.7% Asian, 7.3% Black or African American, 0.9% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 3.6% American Indian or Alaska Native students. All participants found it interesting to see a coalition of students from many different countries and cultural backgrounds. Many feel as though the University of Arizona provides a lot of help for students who are children of immigrants as well as first-generation students. Financial assistance and access to professors who speak their native language are two critical forms of support that help alleviate financial barriers and ensure access to resources for students to achieve their academic goals and reach their full potential.

However, a sense of belonging was not the case for all students. For instance, Chloe was shocked upon coming to the University of Arizona because she expected the University to be more diverse due to its proximity to the US-Mexico border. Chloe expected a majority Hispanic population, rather than the eurocentric student population that she observed. Despite the diversity of students at the University of Arizona, Chloe found it difficult to make friends that she could relate to. Other students stated that they are “comfortable to an extent” here on campus. The students who have not found a profound sense of community at the University of Arizona do not engage in clubs or sororities but find comfort in their classes and major departments.

Undergraduate Challenges

The participants were prompted to share if they encountered any challenges during their undergraduate education. Students discussed familial, economic, resources, and gender stressors. Sarah remarked how attending the University of Arizona has “opened her eyes” to the challenges other people face. Specifically, she explained how undermining it can be to be a woman in college. In her opinion, no matter how successful a woman can be, they are still seen as a little girl in the eyes of other individuals in their line of work. Although Sarah does not face direct challenges, she can recognize the relevance of gender inequality challenges and expects them in her future career. Other students admitted to dealing with family issues while pursuing their degrees. A common theme among the students interviewed was the stress of balancing taking care of their family, with college responsibilities and financial difficulties. Additionally, many

participants mentioned that finding the right academic resources and learning how to use them effectively presented a great challenge upon entering college.

Where do Students Find Their People?

The participants were then asked whether they found a sense of belonging on campus. Although the University of Arizona is large, five participants agree that they can find a sense of community on campus. One participant, Sarah explains “You are able to find those niche groups within the University of Arizona because it is such a big university.” Chloe found her group within one of the multicultural sororities. In this tight-knit community, Chloe found camaraderie and a space to connect with other individuals who shared similar cultural backgrounds and experiences. Her sorority became a haven for mutual understanding, fostering a strong bond among its members. Through shared traditions, celebrations, and shared challenges, Chloe not only forged lasting friendships but also found unique opportunities for personal growth, leadership development, and cultural enrichment. Others found their support systems within their academic community from peers, professors, and advisors.

Four participants interviewed are pursuing majors or minors in Spanish or Portuguese. They remarked on how the Department of Spanish and Portuguese’s faculty provided support and understanding for students of their demographic while recognizing the value they contribute to the University. Olivia is enrolled in a Spanish heritage learning class, which is specifically designed for students whose first language is Spanish. This course allows her to connect with students who share her cultural background and language. Beyond language skills, the class fosters a sense of community, where shared cultural backgrounds create a unique learning environment. This interaction strengthens Olivia’s connection to her roots and provides a supportive network, which, as Olivia stressed, helped motivate her to continue with school. Matt mentioned how many of his friends from back home in Mexico are also attending the University of Arizona, and he finds his sense of belonging here on campus with them. Through his hometown friends, Matt not only maintains ties to his roots but also benefits from a shared understanding that extends beyond academics. Whether navigating the challenges of a new environment or celebrating cultural traditions together, his friends become a crucial support system. The shared experiences and common background ensure the University of Arizona is a more welcoming and inclusive space, enhancing Matt’s overall collegiate experience.

Although the majority of participants found their niche groups on campus, some participants struggled to integrate into university life due to cultural differences and language barriers not always understood by the broader student population.

As follow-up, these participants were asked, what, if anything, can the University of Arizona do to increase the student’s sense of belonging on campus. Chloe suggested expanding the space for Hispanic or Latino students on campus. Although cultural and heritage centers already exist on campus, they are small and relatively unknown to students. Participants suggested that the centers should expand their presence on campus by offering more welcoming and attractive events for Hispanic and Latino students to engage in.

Family Support

The next question posed to the participants was whether their immediate families were supportive of their decision to go to college. Four expressed that their families were supportive and encouraged them from a young age to pursue college to support themselves. As first-generation students, many of these participants receive an immense amount of encouragement from their parents to pursue a college degree. Chloe explains how “one of the main reasons I came to college is because of my parents. I wanted to make them feel proud that their first child was going to college.” However, this is

not the case for all students. Some other participants felt their parents pressured them into pursuing higher education to obtain degrees in fields they were not interested in. Matt explained how he felt “forced” to go to college to become a doctor. Even though integrating into the collegiate school system got easier as the years went by, Matt struggled to find the courage to assert his aspirations and pursue a degree aligned with his passions, rather than fulfilling his parent’s desire for him to pursue a career in medicine. As a non-traditional student returning to college to pursue a different degree, Michelle explains how her parents were supportive of her decision to attend college the first time around but cannot understand why she decided to return to school. Michelle is the same age as her parents were when they purchased their first house, making it challenging for them to understand why she desired to go back to school.

Additionally, two participants mentioned the variance in education levels among their immediate family members added difficulty to their college experience. Michelle commented that, when applying to college, she faced challenges as a result of her parent’s inability to help navigate the college application process. First-generation college students face barriers to understanding the US education system due to their families’ unfamiliarity with the US educational system. As a result, first-generation college students might not receive the same guidance and advice as students whose parents attended college. These challenges highlight the importance of providing comprehensive support for first-generation college students as early as the application process.

What Do You Want Others to Know?

The final question asked participants what they wanted others to know about their experiences at the University of Arizona. Sarah’s response to this question was insightful:

“People need to be more open-minded. We think, believe, and see things in the media and we categorize people as ‘all immigrants are this’ or ‘all immigrants are that.’ But not all immigrants are people of color, and not all immigrants are people who are white. There is such a broad range of [people from various places and backgrounds] and I think that it is important to listen to everyone’s stories. Because we are all different for different reasons. When people categorize others it really closes off your perspective.”

Sarah’s insight highlights the importance of open-mindedness, and avoiding categorization of immigrants based on stereotypes. Sarah’s perspective emphasizes the need to listen to diverse stories without oversimplifying or generalizing individual experiences which is essential for an inclusive academic environment. Navigating college as first-generation students within the context of American identity is no easy feat. With a vast range of educational and social opportunities to facilitate connections with peers and faculty who share similar backgrounds, the University of Arizona can foster a support system crucial for successfully navigating the American college experience.

Limitations

Although this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of first-generation college students who are second-generation immigrants, the study is limited in its small sample size of only six participants and a focus solely on the University of Arizona. Future research could address these constraints by expanding participant samples across diverse universities and regions. Additionally, incorporating longitudinal studies—research conducted over an extended period—would provide insights into the evolving perspectives and challenges faced by these students throughout their academic journey. Such an approach could better explore the dynamic nature of identity, American privilege, and the sense of belonging at a university over time. Furthermore, integrating quantitative methods with qualitative approaches could enhance the generalizability of findings in subsequent investigations. While qualitative methods, such as interviews, provide in-depth insights and rich narratives from participants, quantitative methods involve numerical data analysis, which allows for statistical generalizations. By combining these approaches, researchers can achieve a more

comprehensive understanding of the experiences of first-generation college students who are second-generation immigrants.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate the experiences of first-generation college students who are second-generation immigrants. The study, conducted from January to May 2023, aims to comprehensively understand students' views on American privilege, identity, and overall sense of belonging at the University of Arizona. Participants shared their insights into undergraduate challenges, family support, and their desires for others to understand their experiences. The students highlighted the complexities of assimilating into American culture while preserving their heritage and facing economic and language barriers. Despite diverse experiences, participants emphasized the importance of open-mindedness, rejecting stereotypes, and recognizing the diversity within immigrant communities. Students stressed the importance of support systems, both within the university and from family, in overcoming challenges and fostering a sense of belonging in higher education.

The results of this study aim to aid the University of Arizona in the outreach and support of first-generation college students who are second-generation immigrants. The University of Arizona can improve its outreach and support for students of this demographic by seeking to support these students in all aspects of their lives in addition to academics. Along with broadening financial scholarship opportunities and cultural spaces for first-generation students, the University can work on educating the wider student body and faculty on the experiences of first-generation college students coming from immigrant families. By developing an understanding of each other's experiences, students and faculty alike can provide a supportive environment and system necessary to foster first-generation students' success in college.

Appendix

Demographic Characteristics

1. How old are you?
2. What is your current class standing (e.g., first-year, sophomore, junior, senior)?
3. What is your current major?
4. What is your gender identity?
5. How do you identify ethnically or racially?
6. How do you identify socioeconomically? Choose one:
 - a. Upper-class
 - b. Middle-class
 - c. Lower middle-class
 - d. Working poor
7. To which country or countries does your family trace its ancestry?
 - a. For example, are your parents from Mexico, Guatemala, China, India, etc.?
8. What, if any, cultural or social barriers do you face on a daily basis as a first-generation college student and child of immigrants?

American Identity and American Privilege

1. What does integrating into US society mean to you?
2. Do you believe your family has fully integrated into US society? Why or why not?
3. In your opinion, what does it mean to be an "American"?
4. Do you identify as "American"? Why or why not?
5. When you hear the term "American privilege," what does this mean to you?
6. Where do you see yourself in 5 to 10 years?
7. What are your long-term career goals?

University of Arizona Specific Questions

1. Please describe your experiences as a first-generation college student and child of immigrants at the University of Arizona.
2. Has your immediate family been supportive of your decision to go to college? Why or why not?
3. What challenges, if any, have you experienced during your undergraduate career?
4. Do you feel a sense of belonging on campus?
 - a. If YES: Where do you find this sense of belonging? For example, do you find it in a particular space, class, club, or group?
 - b. If NO: Why?
 - i. What can the University of Arizona do to increase this sense of belonging?
5. What do you want others to know about your experiences at the University of Arizona?

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