

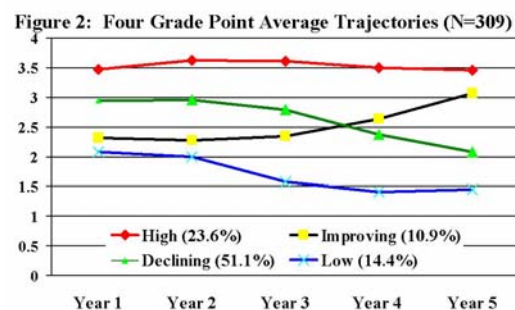
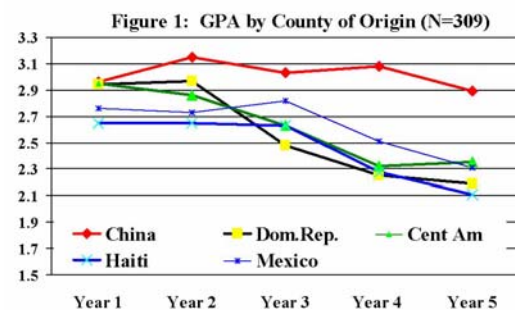
## English Proficiency, Academic Engagement, Social Support, and Immigrant Youth Achievement

Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, Co-Directors of Immigration Studies at New York University presented the results of the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (L.I.S.A.). L.I.S.A. used quantitative and qualitative methods to study achievement trends among 9-to-14 year old immigrant youth, recently (1997-2002) arrived from China, Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Mexico. The project entailed of a number of studies and several research objectives: 1) to analyze whether, on average, the academic performance of new immigrant youth changes over time; 2) to examine whether academic performance over time differs by gender and by country of origin; 3) to identify longitudinal performance pathways that distinguish among new immigrant youth; 4) to identify predictors of GPA and standardized test scores.

Findings show clearly that, on average, GPA declined over time for youth in the L.I.S.A. sample. However, this was not true for everyone. Youth from China were a distinct cohort. As a group, they showed little if any systematic tendency toward a declining GPA. Conversely, students from the other four nations followed quite similar trajectories of decline across the five years. (See Figure 1.)

In addition to the patterns by nation of origin, there were individual differences within each group. Indeed, despite a general pattern of decline, grade point averages were stable or rising for

roughly one-third of the youth in the study. To understand these patterns, the authors used Nagin Cluster Analysis to identify clusters of individuals based on shared developmental trajectories. The analysis was able to distinguish five performance pathways. Figure 2 combines two of those trajectories (Slow Decliners and Precipitous Decliners) into one (i.e., Declining) in a chart that shows the patterns for four pathways. Most interesting, is the pathway labeled “Improving.” Youth on this pathway began in year 1 with an average GPA of 2.32 and by year 5 had achieved an average of 3.06.



Boys were more than twice as likely as girls to be among the Precipitous Decliners and Low Achievers, while girls were more likely than boys to be High Achievers or Improvers. Two-thirds of the Chinese students were High Achievers or Improvers.

The authors devoted considerable effort to analyzing why a young person would be on one pathway as opposed to another. Perhaps not surprisingly, a student's English language proficiency (ELP) was the strongest predictor of both grades and test scores. However, beyond ELP, the authors found evidence for a host of other factors. These other factors were in domains that research on school engagement and youth development have often found predictive of academic and other forms of success for native-born American youth.

Specifically, the project collected data on family structure, parental education, parental employment, school contexts, academic engagement, cognitive engagement (e.g., curiosity), and relational engagement (e.g., ties to peers, teachers, and others), self-efficacy, and attitudes about school. The authors were particularly interested in the possible impact of relational engagement on GPA. Contrary to one of their hypotheses, they found that relational engagement was not directly associated with GPA, but instead predicted GPA indirectly through its impact on what the authors call "behavioral engagement." Behavioral engagement – i.e., attendance, doing homework, paying attention in class, etc. – was a strong predictor of GPA, and was itself predicted by other factors that the project measured.

The authors conclude that many immigrant youth have limited contextual supports that help to predict and produce school success. For example, they report, "few meaningful exchanges and friendships between newly arrived immigrant youngsters and native-born students . . . and little exposure to the

linguistic modeling their American born peers could provide." The schools they attended were frequently of very low quality on multiple dimensions. The authors assert that "policies matter" and that the nation will pay a price if it fails to do better at helping immigrant youth to assimilate in this, their new homeland.

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