



# ADULT CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS: MEMORIES AND INFLUENCES

Children of Immigrant Entrepreneurs Talk about  
Businesses, Families, Graduate Schools and Careers



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## About The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) and The ILC Public Education Institute

The ILC is a not-for-profit adult learning center located in Malden, Massachusetts. Founded in 1992, the mission of The ILC is to provide foreign-born adults with the English proficiency necessary to lead productive lives in the United States.

As a way of continuing to help ILC students and all immigrants become successful workers, parents and community members, the school expanded its mission to include promoting immigrants as assets to America. This expanded mission is known as the Public Education Institute.

The Public Education Institute has three major initiatives to support the goal of promoting immigrants as contributors to America's economic, social and cultural vibrancy.

- Business Sector Studies to examine the impact of immigrants as entrepreneurs, workers and consumers.
- Professional Development for K-12 teachers on teaching immigration across the curriculum.
- An Immigration Research and Information website that provides easy access to the spectrum of contemporary research about immigrants in the United States. ([www.immigrationresearch-info.org](http://www.immigrationresearch-info.org))

Diane Portnoy is the President and CEO of The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. and has been in the adult education profession for more than 30 years as a certified teacher. Ms. Portnoy has received considerable recognition locally and nationally for her visionary leadership. The ILC has been cited as a model adult education program in Massachusetts.

The Public Education Institute is under the direction of Marcia Drew Hohn who holds a doctorate in Human and Organizational Systems and has more than 20 years of experience in adult learning and systems development. Dr. Hohn has published extensively about organizational systems and immigrant entrepreneurship.

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Businesses, Families, Graduate Schools and Careers

Prepared for  
The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.  
Malden, Massachusetts

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## About the Institute for Asian American Studies (IAAS) at the University of Massachusetts Boston

The Institute for Asian American Studies (IAAS) serves as a center for research and policy analysis that informs policymakers, service providers, scholars, community groups and the media about a comprehensive range of issues affecting Asian Americans in Massachusetts and across the country. IAAS also provides resources to Asian American communities and expands opportunities on campus for the study of Asian American experiences.

The Institute produces numerous demographic studies of Asian Americans down to the municipal level and including profiles of specific Asian ethnic groups. In addition, the Institute conducts research on political behavior, economic development, health, civic engagement and related issues.

The emphasis of the IAAS on critical public policy issues has resulted in several studies published by The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.

## Preface

In 2003, The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) launched a public education initiative to raise the visibility of immigrants as assets to America. Spurred by certain anti-immigrant sentiments that were increasingly voiced after September 11, The ILC set forth to credibly document current economic and social contributions. Central to this effort are ILC-sponsored research studies about immigrants as entrepreneurs, workers and consumers.

To provide thoughtful and substantive evidence that immigrants are vital contributors to our nation and to our state, The ILC commissioned teams of university researchers to examine immigrants' contributions as entrepreneurs, workers and consumers and to present those contributions within larger economic and social frameworks.

ILC studies have examined immigrant workers in the Massachusetts health care industry as well as the demographic characteristics and economic footprint of immigrants in Massachusetts overall. However, a specialty has developed in immigrant entrepreneurship. Five studies have examined its various dimensions.

- *Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Neighborhood Revitalization* (2005)
- *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in the Massachusetts Biotechnology Industry* (2007)
- *The Rise of Asian-Owned Businesses in Massachusetts* (2007)
- *Impact of Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Workers in Leisure and Hospitality Businesses: Massachusetts and New England* (2010)
- *Immigrant Growth Businesses and the Green Economy* (coming in 2012).

With this study, we have shifted the lens to look at the experiences of growing up in a household where the parents supported the family through a small business. These children of immigrant entrepreneurs were expected to help with the business, but their parents also saw education as the path to a better life for them and encouraged their educational pursuits. While the focus of the study is on the influence of these experiences on their career aspirations and goals, a great deal was learned about the immigrant-owned businesses in the process. This learning contributes substantially to the increasing base of knowledge about immigrant-owned small businesses.

In providing these studies, The ILC is seeking to inform policy and promote thoughtful dialogue about the key roles played by immigrants. As America grapples with how to reform its immigration system, we hope these studies will help provide a rational basis for reform.

Diane Portnoy, President and CEO

Marcia Drew Hohn, Director, Public Education Institute

The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.

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## KEY FINDINGS



The following is a summary of findings specific to participants in this study.

- Education is highly valued among immigrant families that own businesses. The views and experiences of the parents inspired and catalyzed the children's pursuit of advanced higher education.
- Growing up in a business environment that typically involved direct and constant contact with the public, the adult children of immigrant entrepreneurs learned not only good business survival skills but also appropriate social skills.
- Such an environment ingrained them with a strong work ethic: that success and sacrifice go hand-in-hand.
- Adult children of immigrant entrepreneurs feel a deep-seated desire to give back to their communities. This is reflected in their research fields (e.g., urban planning), choice of degrees (public health, education), extra-curricular activities (foreign languages) and choice of work (social work).
- There is an inherent appreciation among the adult children of immigrant entrepreneurs for the sacrifices their parents made to ensure that they have successful careers and lead normal lives in their adopted homeland.



## INTRODUCTION



This study is the latest publication reflecting the commitment of The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) to examine diverse issues related to immigrant entrepreneurship. It builds upon the work reported in *Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Neighborhood Revitalization: Studies of the Allston Village, East Boston and Fields Corner Neighborhoods in Boston* published in 2005. In that study, 35 immigrant-owned, storefront businesses were closely chronicled with an emphasis on start-up decisions, business operation, access to programs and services, neighborhood relationships and future plans.

Other studies commissioned by The ILC about immigrant entrepreneurs reinforce the importance of immigrant families in their ventures. Business and family networks are dynamically intertwined whether in high-tech endeavors, mid-size growth companies or small bodegas.

The children of immigrant entrepreneurs, specifically Asian American and Latina/o graduate and professional students, are the focus of this report. From their perspective, we gain insight into two areas:

1. immigrant businesses and the families connected to them; and,
2. the influence of being raised in an immigrant business family on the children's educational and career choices.

In particular, we consider children of immigrant entrepreneurs who are pursuing advanced education in graduate or professional schools.

This study is a rich and deep portrait of ethnically diverse graduate students who grew up in households where parents had their own businesses, which were usually small and local. The participants represent the increasingly diverse universe of students in colleges across the country where shifting demographics are changing the faces of both undergraduate and graduate education in the United States. Clearly, seeing how hard their parents worked to provide a life in America as well as the

value they placed on education as an avenue to a better life had profound effects on the study participants. Even though their parents were not always able to provide the educational guidance and support needed in seeking higher education, as one participant notes, "I didn't get here alone." Whether conveyed directly or indirectly, study participants collectively feel that their parents' views and experiences are the catalysts for their pursuit of advanced higher education. Moreover, almost all of the participants note how they were inspired by their immigrant parents and how that influenced them.

In order to have a clearer understanding of the Asian American and Latina/o children of immigrant entrepreneurs in this research, we felt that it was crucial to provide them with the best opportunity to "amplify" (Diniz-Pereira, 2005, 2006) their voices. In focus groups, students discussed several issues elicited by the following questions:

1. What can you tell us about the experience of growing up in an immigrant family that owned a business? What role(s) did you play in your parents' business?
2. What do you feel are the positive and negative effects of being raised in an immigrant household on what you've chosen to do in life? How did your family's background and the views and experiences of your family influence your decision to attend graduate or professional school or to select a particular career?
3. What are some other primary factors that influenced your decision on these matters? What does your family think about your chosen educational and career aspirations?

A detailed methodology outlining recruitment of subjects, structure of focus groups and participant demographics can be found in **Appendix A** on page 51.





CONTEXT:

Recent Immigrants from Latin America and Asia and Their Children



The passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, also known as the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, has had a significant impact on the current composition of the American people. The Act eliminated the 1924 National Origins Quota System and ended various laws that adversely affected many communities from Asia, the Pacific Islands, Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean. Since the 1980s, “88 percent of [the] immigrants who...have entered the United States come from Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia” (Levitt and Waters, 2002, p.13). Thus, the Act, which opened the door to those formerly excluded, has profoundly altered the demographic makeup of the nation including dramatic changes in the Asian American and Latina/o communities.

The post-1965 immigrants and their children, in addition to being racially and ethnically diverse, are also heterogeneous in terms of social and economic resources. They reflect “bipolar immigrant streams” where large numbers of skilled professionals and entrepreneurs combine with uneducated and unskilled laborers (Levitt and Waters, 2002). For example, among Hmong Americans 25 and older, 47 percent had attained less than a fifth-grade education while 40.4 percent had a high school diploma, bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census, 2000). Similar disparities could be seen in Cambodian (29.7 percent vs. 46.7 percent) and Lao American populations (25.4 percent vs. 50.5 percent) (U.S. Census, 2000).

As we have detailed in other reports (Borges-Mendez, Liu and Watanabe, 2005; Watanabe, 2007), many of these immigrants have developed and owned small businesses. At the same time, the children of immigrants are “the fastest-growing segment of the country’s total population of children under 18 years of age” (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, p. 19). While most research on children of immigrants focuses on students in K-12 and college, this study asks, “What are the reflections and experiences of those in graduate or professional schools whose parents have owned businesses in the United States?” The adults in our study are generally young enough to offer vivid recollections of their experiences growing up in family-owned businesses. On the other hand, since they are pursuing advanced studies at the graduate level, they are by and large settled on their specific educational needs and career aspirations and can speak authoritatively about factors that have influenced those critical choices.



## PARTICIPANTS <sup>1</sup>

TABLE: PARTICIPANTS<sup>1</sup>

NAME	AGE	ETHNICITY	GENDER	GRADUATE/PROFESSIONAL PROGRAM	FAMILY BUSINESS
Gabriela	24	Filipina	F	Medical Sciences	Catering
Dae-Hyun	28	Korean	M	Medicine	Restaurant
Chris	23	Korean	M	Journalism	Retail furniture
Sokha	29	Cambodian	F	School Psychology; Public Health	Daycare; Grocery store; Liquor store
Daniel	24	Taiwanese	M	Public Health; Medicine	Plastics and computer components; Canola oil
Kendra	29	Taiwanese	F	Theology; Counseling	Restaurant
Evelyn	26	Chinese	F	Law	Automobile parts
Yvonne	26	Chinese	F	Business	Automobile repair
Chun Hei	26	Korean	F	Public Health	Apparel manufacturing
May	29	Cambodian -Malaysian	F	Pharmacy	Café
Vicky	28	Chinese	F	Counseling Psychology	Restaurant
Manny	n/a	Dominican	M	Hispanic and Spanish Literature	Restaurant
Patricia	25	Cuban	F	Law	Window covering; Carpet and linoleum installation
Malaya	24	Mexican	F	Law	Daycare
Nicolas	22	Latino	M	Law	Social services
Andrea	24	Indian	F	Public Health	Gas station
Lynda	24	Filipina	F	Business	Real estate
Gwen	24	Korean	F	Public Health	Textiles
Rachel	25	Chinese -Vietnamese	F	Public Health	Restaurant
Lisa	24	Chinese	F	Medicine	Restaurant
Tiffany	25	Taiwanese	F	Law	Hospitals
Peter	22	Chinese	M	Business	Restaurant; Insurance
Betty	27	Chinese	F	Medicine	Restaurant
Adriana	28	Cuban	F	Law and Diplomacy	Construction
Felipe	24	Mexican	M	Law	Restaurant; Ice cream truck
Carmen	28	Mexican	F	Organic Chemistry	Restaurant
Brian	20	Chinese	M	Biotechnology Engineering	Restaurant
Sam	23	Korean	M	Divinity	Restaurant
Leah	27	Latina	F	Law and Diplomacy	Engineering
Maribel	29	Salvadoran	F	Business	Cleaning
Elaine	32	Chinese	F	Counseling Psychology	Restaurant
Vanessa	24	Japanese	F	College Student Development and Counseling	Export
Diana	24	Filipina	F	Education	Restaurant; Jewelry
Jason	21	Mexican	M	Education	Daycare
Tai	24	Vietnamese-Polish	M	Medicine	Restaurant
Allison	27	Korean	F	Law	Shoe repair

## Fields of study

There were 26 Asian Americans and 10 Latina/os involved in this study, 25 of whom were female and 11 male. They represented a spectrum of academic fields and standing (see **Participant Information on page 14**). Ranging in age from 21 to 32, some participants had just completed their graduate training while others had secured undergraduate degrees and were advancing their studies. Both the fields of study and the schools attended varied among the group. Participants were either 1.5- or second-generation immigrants, most arriving when they were less than five years old. They had come to Massachusetts from across the country to pursue bachelor's or advanced degrees (see **Appendix A on page 51**). One-third were in the medical field, including medical sciences and public health, while nine pursued law degrees (see **Participant Information on page 14**). Other areas of study included education, theology, counseling and business.

## Family backgrounds

All of the students participating in this study had at least one parent who immigrated to the United States between the early 1960s to early 1990s. While nearly all of the parents were immigrants or at least one parent per household was an immigrant, two of the participants' fathers were born in the United States to Mexican immigrants. The majority of the children of immigrants came from two-parent households; six out of the 36 had parents who were either separated or divorced.

Some families were able to come to the United States together as a family unit. In other cases, one parent arrived first to settle down and create stability before bringing the family to the United States. Some of the 1.5-generation participants were separated from one of the parents as a result of immigration outcomes and/or employment situations in the United States. As a result, they were cared for by relatives such as usually grandparents, aunts or uncles. This separation of family members for periods of time is a common reality for many immigrant families (Qin, 2006; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Wong, 2008b).

At the same time, several families examined as part of this study, specifically Chinese Americans, had roots in the United States since the late 1800s. A few of the families were second migrants who moved to or from another state and, thus, secondary migration was a common theme among some of the immigrant families. For example, some of the parents went to a particular state for their college and/or graduate studies and then decided to move and settle elsewhere after completing their education. Others came as refugees who resettled to another state owing to the presence of an established or a growing ethnic community with a more supportive social network. Many families, in short, relocated to seek better job opportunities, to reunite with families in the area and to draw support from a more established ethnic community. With such support, the parents were able to start businesses from insurance sales to ice cream trucks with more than half working in the food business as caterers, restaurant owners or grocers (see **Participant Information on page 14**). Other businesses included jewelry stores, daycare, gas stations and car repair.





## MEMORIES OF THE FAMILY BUSINESS

The types of businesses in which the participants' families were involved were varied (see **Participant Information on page 14**). The majority of the businesses were in the catering and restaurant sector (n = 17). The remaining represented a wide range of businesses. The years of operation also ranged widely: Some lasted for fewer than five years, others lasted for more than 30 years and others continued to operate. The size of the businesses also varied from two full-time employees (most often their parents) to more than ten full-time and/or part-time employees.

Most of the family businesses either had both parents working at the business, or one parent worked there full-time while the other worked elsewhere and helped out after work and on the weekends. Three of the families, as a result of immigration, either relocated their business or added an office in the United States. There were also those who opened and tried multiple types of businesses either all at once or one after another.

### Starting the family business

The reasons that their parents decided to become entrepreneurs included: the business provided a temporary option, particularly for those in-between jobs; the business provided a source of income in addition to their existing jobs; the business was perceived as the only option given barriers such as limited English language capabilities and advancing age; someone in their family was in the business when they immigrated to the United States.

Those parents who saw the business as temporary were usually the ones between jobs as a result of layoffs or a challenging economy. In these cases, the parents were entrepreneurs for fewer than five years. Born and raised in Tucson, Arizona, **Leah**, for instance, was attending graduate school at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, with a focus on international business relations and trade and commercial policy. Her Chil-

ean immigrant parents came to the United States to pursue graduate studies in the early 1970s and then settled in Tucson after finishing their degrees. For a little more than two years, **Leah's** father owned a small engineering business because "he was between jobs." As a result, the business was a short-term engagement for the family especially since the company "was not bringing in money." Currently, her father is an engineer at a firm in Tucson and works in advanced materials while her mother "does not work outside the home."

Similarly, **Gabriela's** father, who currently works as a computer technician in California, started a Filipino catering business shortly after he was laid off in 1995. **Gabriela** remembers those years as "very unstable" for her family. Moreover, along with her mother and younger sister, **Gabriela** came to the United States three years prior to reunite with her father, who came in 1986. During this time, as a recent immigrant, her mother was working two to three jobs at fast food restaurants. Realizing that they needed a more stable income and given that her dad already worked as a chef on a cruise ship in Hawaii, her parents decided to open a catering business. At times, friends of her parents would work at some of the events, but from the very beginning, the business was a four-person workplace. Her parents would do the cooking and work the events while **Gabriela** and her younger sister were in charge of the food preparation and presentation. The support from many of the local Filipino businesses helped spread the business to the community and made the business an immediate success. Every week, there were at least two events throughout northern California that required traveling from San Jose to Sacramento. While the business "took off right away," the time, amount of work and stress that it entailed was overwhelming for the family. **Gabriela** recalls those days as being "really taxing on the family." After three years, when her father was able to find a position with benefits, the family decided the best option was to close the catering business.

Some of the immigrant parents chose to start businesses as a result of their limited English language capabilities. Starting ethnic businesses for some of these immigrants was regarded as the only employment option. **Manny**, a Dominican graduate student, sums up how language serves as a major reason for Asian and Latino/a immigrant parents to pursue opening a business:

*...language is a big barrier when parents come here [to the U.S.] and they don't speak English and they come at an older age. My mother, I imagine she couldn't do anything else. I mean she didn't know how to speak English. She could have worked at a factory, but I don't think she would have been able to raise us that way; the income wasn't going to be enough.*

Some of the participants note that age affected their immigrant parents' job opportunities and ability to learn English since some of them came in their 30s and 40s. Parents who had completed their college degrees in their countries of origin often experienced occupational downgrades in the United States. Many immigrant professionals have not been able to find work in their respective fields and with jobs that match their educational qualifications. This is particularly the case since most of the parents attended or completed some form of higher education, i.e., college or graduate school, in their home country or even in the United States.

**Kendra's** parents, for instance, both hold college degrees from Taiwan. Her mother graduated as valedictorian of her class at National Taiwan University, "the Harvard of Taiwan," but, according to **Kendra**, due to the language barrier the only jobs available to them were in the ethnic community. In their situation, opening Chinese restaurants was their option particularly since her parents needed to find an occupation that would generate enough income for a household of six. **Kendra's** father immigrated first to settle down before the rest of the family joined him. A few years later, **Kendra's** mother came to the United States. At that time, **Kendra**, who was two years old, was cared for by her grandparents. When **Kendra** turned four, she and her grandparents joined her parents. Having to care for a large household and the long restaurant hours meant that her parents "never got the

chance" to go back to school to learn English, which was what they had intended to do. The tensions of exhausting work schedules, language barriers, age and limited free time constrained them as they did many other immigrant parents.

For some of the participants' families, an established support network to tap into already existed for their parents when they came to the United States or when they moved as secondary migrants to a different part of the country. In these cases, resources were available to them to access the workforce and involve themselves in business ownership. **Vicky** and her family came to the United States in 1991 from southern China. Her father immediately started working at one of her uncle's Chinese restaurants. A few years later, one of the uncles sold his share to **Vicky's** dad making him co-owner. **Vicky** recalls her father telling her that due to the limited job opportunities for recent immigrants and the language barrier "restaurants were something he could do."

**Andrea's** parents came to the United States from India in 1982 where her mother was a housewife and her dad was an engineer. Once her parents settled in California, her father worked as an engineer for a short period before joining the family's gas station business. The career switch, according to **Andrea**, was the result of a lack of stability in the engineering field and, to some extent, being an immigrant of color. She explains:

*In the '80s, if you were an immigrant with an engineering degree, [it was] harder to get jobs, harder to get a visa. I had an uncle who did it, and he was moving every six months. It was a really difficult lifestyle. So it was stability that they needed because they [had] started having children. I think when my mom was pregnant with me was when my dad went into it. So a steady job is really helpful.*

Today, her parents own two gas stations, and all of the maternal side of the family own gas stations. In both **Vicky** and **Andrea's** families, the extended family provided crucial support and resources for their parents to become entrepreneurs.



## Pen Khek Chear

Master's in Social Work, Boston University  
Parents' country of origin: Cambodia

“My Dad did not want to teach me to be a jeweler because he was afraid I would like it.” He wanted Pen to have the opportunities that were never available to him. His only vocational option in Cambodia was to be trained as a jeweler by an uncle in the business. If his father had a choice, he would have gotten a college education and worked for the United Nations to prevent war and promote peace.

When his parents came to Philadelphia in 1982 as Cambodian refugees, financial survival demanded that his parents work hard in the only area they knew, which was the jewelry business.

At first, his father worked for other businesses while his mother attended high school as an older student to learn English, earn a high school credential and tend to infant Pen and his sister. They managed to save money and, when his mother's family arrived later on, some “rotating credit” for their own business emerged as well as help from the Mennonite church that originally sponsored their emigration. His parents had no idea that there were community-based programs that might help them. He describes:

*The business was just Mom and Dad. Mom did the sales, and Dad did the jewelry work. At first, it was mostly repairs done directly or for other stores, but then the sale of gold and platinum jewelry became the main business. [And] it supported them and two kids! As a little kid, I ran errands and entertained customers. When I was in my teens, I did some sales. I had the typical teenager negative attitude but soon realized the benefits. It was a mixture of appreciation and negativity. I benefitted from witnessing how hard my parents worked – six days a week and on holidays with my Dad working at home too, or 60 to 80 hours per week. [I began to recognize that] the business was a big source of stress for my parents and on their marriage.*

The business had upward growth. Its reputation as a family-oriented business with high integrity increased sales volume, and they moved to a bigger location. But they did not want to grow beyond a certain point or keep expanding. His family was very community-oriented and active in the Cambodian Mennonite church in Philadelphia. Pen reflects on how these activities educated him in social justice as he grew up and helped lead him to graduate studies in Social Work at Boston University where he focused on violence-related trauma.

“My parents wanted me to get an education and be a ‘respectable professional’ and not have to do ‘hard labor.’” In many ways, Pen is living out his father's dream by getting to choose the study and work of his life. Given his family's refugee experience coming from a war-torn country and deep engagement with community issues, it is not a surprising that he is choosing to work with issues of interpersonal and institutional violence. He will not be doing “hard labor,” but he will be giving back to the community.

## *“Taking naps on...sacks of rice”*

### Home and business intertwined

For some of the children of immigrant business owners, their parents’ business was a large part of their lives while growing up, a veritable second home since much of their time was spent there. **Betty**, a second-generation Chinese American and medical student at Tufts University, vividly remembers growing up in her parents’ Chinese restaurant this way:

*I wrote a college essay about how I grew up in the restaurant and the smell of garlic and pepper and all that other stuff. My cousins and I used to sleep on sacks of rice in the back during rush hour. We would put down all our coats and gather our moms and dads’ winter jackets and spread them out. The storeroom was kind of like our playroom. If something needed to be done, then they would call us and we would run and do it and we would come back and continue taking naps on these sacks of rice.*

Similarly, **Patricia**, who studies at Boston College Law School, remembers her parents’ commercial window covering business. **Patricia**’s parents started the business in 1976 before she was born. Being an only child, her parents brought her to work and, as a result, **Patricia** “became really involved.” Like others in this study, her responsibilities increased with age. She describes:

*When I was tall enough to reach the copying machine, I was making copies. So when I was little, I was doing photocopying and then I moved to invoicing, answering the phones and doing supply orders, doing their quarterly taxes and different things. I also delivered vertical blinds, which is always fun when I show up as a 17-, 18-year-old with vertical blinds on my shoulder. I did everything. When I was 17, they would leave me alone with the business.*

**Patricia**’s role at the family business was particularly common for those who were an only child and whose parents owned small businesses that employed fewer than five workers. As Patricia got older, her parents added more roles for her and eventually she “learned every single part of their business.”

Clearly, for those who grew up with the business being a part of the family and home structure, the roles and responsibilities were intertwined. **Malaya** explains:

*While I was in school, the minute I got home from school I had to read to the kids or make dinner... I hung the diapers, watched the kids, supervised while they were playing outside and washed the dishes... Even when I was working, I got home from work at five. There’s one hour, and “can you watch the kids until they get picked up at six?”*

In **Chun Hei**’s family, the involvement of the children commenced immediately after the family came to the United States from South Korea. She remembers doing the household bills while her brother helped their parents search for housing.

**Sam**, a second-generation Korean American, talks about the novel role he played as the “lunch-time entertainment” at his parents’ sandwich shop in Orange County, California, and how that involvement proved to be an unexpected asset:

*When my parents owned the sandwich shop, I was six, seven or eight...they did encourage me to walk around the tables and actually talk to people especially during lunch time. I think that’s where I learned all my social skills especially in that formative age. So I guess I was the lunch-time entertainment...Apparently business went up after I started doing this.*

Some of the participants’ experience and involvement in the family business depended on the type of business. For instance, the children of immigrant entrepreneurs were more directly involved if the business was in the restaurant, daycare or other service sector. At the same time, as illustrated later in this study, while they were involved with their parents’ businesses, these participants generally handled the customer service aspects of the businesses and were kept away from the manual labor side.

A few of the children of immigrant entrepreneurs did not need to help out with the business or were actively urged not to be involved. This later view reflects the findings from Park’s research on children of Asian immigrant entrepreneurs in which she found that “the

reason why their parents own a small family business is for them [the children], and more specifically, their education” (2005, p. 33). In other words, the primary purpose of the business is to facilitate the education of the children rather to involve them in it. As a result, several children of immigrant entrepreneurs had little direct involvement with the business.

Born and raised in Miami, Florida, **Adriana** aspires to work in a not-for-profit human rights organization after finishing her last year at The Fletcher School at Tufts University. **Adriana** was not required to work at her parents’ construction company, which her dad started 35 years ago in Miami. Her involvement was minimal. The times **Adriana** was at the office she would answer the phones and do some filing because “I couldn’t really be laying cement. And then the stuff at the office was just too complicated like ‘accounts payable’ and ‘accounts receivable.’”

**Peter**, a second-generation Chinese American seeking to be a Certified Public Accountant, notes two main reasons why he was sheltered from working at his parents’ business: education and normalcy. The dominant culture’s understanding of normalcy influenced how they viewed family life especially during the child’s teenage years. In **Peter**’s case, his parents “wanted [him] to focus more on [his] education,” rather than getting involved in the small business, a small insurance company in Boston’s Chinatown. Interestingly, he also describes how, growing up in a predominately White middle- to upper-middle-class city just outside of Boston, his parents wanted “the most normal life” for him and not to make him “stand out” from the crowd. He explains, “They tried to make me more of the stereotypical White person in [my city]...and just to do well in school to fit in.”

**Peter**’s comments reveal an important point. Immigrants, particularly immigrants of color, are often portrayed as the outsiders and are always the ones that need to “fit in.” This is especially the case for those who have recently

obtained middle-class status and have been able to move to wealthier communities. At the same time, although **Peter**’s parents own and run their business, the prestige may not necessarily translate well in their residential community where “parents are the doctors, lawyers and engineers in big companies” and where, as Noguera has noted, in similar communities “affluent White parents were typically more powerful and politically influential” than parents of color (2008, p. 138). Owning a small business that serves an ethnic community in some ways, therefore, may devalue one’s family in certain communities and, assuredly, children involved in a Chinatown restaurant might be regarded as out of the mainstream. Consequently, in addition to being non-White, these families, who are new to their more advanced socioeconomic status, often feel constrained to try to “fit in” to such communities and to not stand out too much.

**Rachel**’s father, who came to the United States as a refugee from Vietnam in 1980, owned a Vietnamese restaurant in Boston’s Chinatown for 14 years. Eventually, her father, who had a junior high school level education in Vietnam, sold the restaurant and retired since “it wasn’t as successful as it once was,” which caused him a great deal of stress. Now he works as the head cook at a restaurant. **Rachel**, who is doing her first year in a public health program and hopes to concentrate in community health and nutrition, recounts in detail her parents’ views of not having the children directly involved in the business:

*My parents, especially my mom, did not want me to do any manual labor as a kid. She tried to keep me out of working as long as possible...They definitely didn’t insist that I work at an early age ‘cause [for] a lot of my friends that I know their parents kind of did. I think the restaurant business was to afford the lifestyle that they wanted us to have in America, like I took piano lessons. It wasn’t like a joint effort for everyone to contribute to it.*

**Vicky**, who is in a counseling psychology doctoral program, recalls an emotional conversation that her father had with her about college and the family business. After her first year in college, he told her it was more important to him for her to concentrate on school instead of commuting back and forth to work and helping out at the family restaurant. She remembers:

*He didn't want me to be like some of those other kids who helped out with the family business and not do well in school. Because, like, what's the point of me going to college? We had family friends who [were] also in a similar situation [and] had a daughter and a son, and they both helped out at the restaurant. But then, like, they didn't do well in college or went to a community college. So my dad said, "Yes, they make more money because they have two kids helping them, but their kids are not doing well in school, or they don't have a future in education because they work in a family business."*

The notion that the business was not to affect her school work and that it was not going to be passed down to the children was made clear to her and to the majority of the participants.

Many other parents, especially those in the food service and other sectors that required manual labor, did not want their children to engage in that type of work. While their children helped out at the business, almost all of the parents did not want their children to do the manual labor side of the business. Often, they were discouraged from the workload located in the back of the business. Instead, most of these children's roles and responsibilities were limited to customer service such as taking care of the orders, waiting tables, managing the floor or managing finances, e.g. bookkeeping and scheduling.

In performing these tasks, the children were often the "face" of the business. For instance, **Evelyn** did "everything" from packing orders to answering the phones at her parents' take-out business. She did everything, it seems, except the cooking. She says her parents "didn't want to teach any one of us" how to cook the different dishes.

Similarly, **Allison's** role at her parents' small business has mostly been interacting with the customers. Her parents own and operate a small shoe repair business just outside Washington, D.C., in Maryland. When they were younger, **Allison** and her brother would do minimal customer service work such as working at the cash register, sorting products and stamping tickets. While the shop has been open for almost twenty years, her parents never taught them how to repair shoes or do alterations. Instead, **Allison's** role for the past few years has become the "go collector." She details her role at her parents' business this way:

*What I do is I would call so people will bring their shoes, or they will bring their bags or clothes to the store, get a ticket and then my parents would do the work, and they won't come back, which is bad because my parents won't get paid for the work they did because they don't pre-pay. They take the money when they come pick up the clothes or shoes. And so every couple of months when I come home from school, I would just make calls...and tell them "you left your shoes here back in October 2006. It's been two years, come pick them up."*

Her parents think that "it's actually more effective" when **Allison**, rather than her mother, contacts the customers. Her mother's reasoning is that Allison does not "speak in broken English" and people, therefore, respond to her calls. When we asked why her parents never taught their children more about the business, Allison mentions that "they did not want [her] to go into the family business." She says, "They thought that was the worst thing ever. They just didn't want me to take over the store."

Again, these children's roles have been in the customer service sector of the business and their parents "didn't want [them] to take over" the business. By not teaching their children how to cook or how to learn shoe repair, for example, these parents felt that they were keeping their children away from a life of hard labor.

It is interesting to note, however, that while they are in graduate school and/or away from their families and their family businesses, these children of immigrant



entrepreneurs still often assist their parents when they do return home. **Malaya**, a law student at Boston College, talks about her mother who runs a daycare business out of their home in southern California. “If you’re home, you’re helping” was the mentality with which **Malaya** grew up. In other words, for these children, their identities as children of immigrant business owners do not change simply because they are in graduate school. Rather, their experiences with the businesses remain critical to their identities.

Since, as we have noted, many immigrant businesses were started as a response to the limited English language abilities of the parents, those limitations often meant that children were involved in the businesses by helping to fulfill important roles. Having parents with limited English language skills, role reversals between immigrant parents and their children are common as the children assist their parents in a new society (Kibria, 1993; Lee, 2005; Lee and Kumashiro, 2005; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Sung, 1987; Wong, 2008a) and in family and business affairs. Consequently, non-fluent English-speaking immigrant parents often are dependent on their children to help them negotiate with the outside world because their children “typically come into contact with [U.S.] American culture sooner” than they do (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 73). For example, **Sam** reflects on how language differences restrained and restricted his immigrant parents from fully connecting with the dominant culture. He says, “I had to be the translator because my parents didn’t want to talk to HR [human resources] people because they knew how they would be treated.”

**Sam** also highlights another important point. The ways in which immigrants of color whose names look “un-American” and/or speak with an accent often encounter racism, hostility and discrimination. Others also share similar sentiments. **Dae-Hyun**, a medical student and 1.5-generation Korean American, along with his younger sister, helped his parents when they operated a small stand at a “glorified flea market” convention. Up to this day, **Dae-Hyun** remembers a particular incident and the sense of helplessness he felt after watching how a customer treated his father. He tearfully recalls:

*It’s just through those experiences you see a lot and you go through a lot. You see the way your parents are treated by others. And that’s not the way they should be treated, but they were treated that way because of their place in this society... One customer bought something from us. The thing with flea markets is there are a thousand shops, but they all sell the same thing. This lady bought something. And the thing is they are all the same type of people – immigrants that have to find work. To her, every Asian looked the same. She bought something and she was walking by, and she saw the same product at our booth. She thought it was from us. I guess the product wasn’t as described or it malfunctioned or something. She came back to return it and my dad said, “This isn’t from us. We wouldn’t sell you this kind of item. We wouldn’t describe an item as X and sell it as Y.” She just made these derogatory comments saying she knows how we all work, and she started yelling. Just seeing my dad having to hold back his emotions, because knowing that I was next to him, he didn’t deserve it, you know.*

**Sam** and **Dae-Hyun**’s observations demonstrate how immigrant parents often depend on their children to bridge their world with the dominant society. **Dae-Hyun**’s comments also suggest a prevailing stereotype that Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners. This promulgates the persistent racialization that “Asians look the same,” and they are less than fully American because of their allegedly unbreakable ties to their homelands (Lee, 1996; Lee and Kumashiro, 2005; Lee, Wong and Alvarez, 2009; Wong, 2005).

Many, like **Sam**, also mention that the social skills they learned from being at their parents’ business are extremely beneficial especially in graduate school and in pursuing their careers. In other words, through activities such as in-person and telephone interactions with customers and other business people, a strong sense of confidence and networking skills were developed.



## INFLUENCES ON EDUCATION AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS



## *“Education has always been an important thing”*

### Families’ views of education

Two common themes often dominating these immigrant families are the importance of education and the opportunities that the United States offers. For instance, “education has always been an important thing in our family” is a statement expressed repeatedly. Oftentimes, especially when they were younger, the meaning of this message was not fully appreciated, and the parents’ views were not clearly understood. As these children of immigrants grew into young adulthood, they began to comprehend and sympathize more with their parents’ advice and desires.

Some parents had a more direct, verbal approach. Comments such as “you are able to do all of these things that we were never able to do” and “if you want a happy life you have to go to school” were common. The message that a graduate degree was the quickest way to obtain the so-called “American Dream” was often suggested.

**Jason**, a second-generation Mexican American, will soon be entering a master in education program. Coming from Oxnard, California, **Jason** is the youngest of eight children. He notes that, while growing up, his parents’ message for him and his siblings was “unless you want to break your backs in the fields [or] take care of kids the rest of your life, you have to get an education. That’s how all of us ended up going to college.” His mother, who worked in “random factory jobs,” has owned and run a daycare center in their family’s home for more than 10 years. **Jason**’s dad was a welder for a number of years before he was placed on disability, which was hard on the family since the daycare became the family’s only source of income. Previously, his father was a part of the *Bracero* Program and came to work the fields in the 1960s as a migrant worker, which meant he would travel “anywhere there was a crop.”

The messages of other parents about education were often less direct and more subtle. In those instances, obtaining an education was simply understood as an unspoken rule. Seeing their immigrant parents work long

and tiring hours conveyed to children the importance of working hard. For example, statements like **Evelyn**’s are typical. “You realize what situation they’re in and how hard they’re working, and you realize they’re not asking you to do anything else but do well in school,” she says.

## *“Stability” & “respect”*

### Parents and families’ perspectives on graduate school

Undoubtedly, the glass ceiling has been a significant barrier confronting many immigrant parents especially for those whose often impressive qualifications have not been recognized in the United States. Some of the graduate students, furthermore, mention racial inequality as having a huge impact on how they are perceived. As a result, the message that “you need to work twice as hard” is repeatedly voiced by students.

**Andrea**, a second-generation Indian American whom we met earlier, mentions how her parents always felt Indians and Indian Americans with a bachelor’s degree did not receive the same kind of respect and opportunities as their White male peers and colleagues. This is true despite the fact that **Andrea**’s father holds an engineering degree from India. For him, a major reason why he decided to leave the field and enter the gas station business with the family was because, as an immigrant of color, “he could never imagine himself going up that ladder.” The lesson that **Andrea**’s parents conveyed to her and her siblings based on this experience is that “we have to work twice as hard as people who are already here.” Like other immigrant parents, the view of **Andrea**’s parents is that education is the only way to obtain respect and opportunities: Education is “the only way you can survive in this country.”

As an infant, **Sokha** left Cambodia and settled in Oregon with her parents and two siblings in 1981. Then, after six years, her parents decided to move cross country to Lowell, Massachusetts, to open a grocery store since they had heard there was a growing Cambodian population in Lowell. Her mom’s siblings and parents were all on the East Coast and, thus, moving closer to family was another



## Jeffrey Juarez-Araniva

Master's candidate in Urban Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)  
Parents' country of origin: El Salvador

“From 6 a.m. to dusk, my parents ran a business every weekend in one of the open-air, informal malls that have sprung up all over the country.” Also known as “swap meets,” these enterprises offer a huge range of goods from underwear and shoes to electronic items. The prices are affordable and negotiable, and the atmosphere is festive.

While most vendors are there to sell and supplement other income, swap meets also play an important role in developing social relationships. The openness of the marketplace facilitates social interactions and a “learning-from-each-other” environment. There may be as many as 1,000 vendors in these marketplaces across a large number of ethnicities and including many immigrants who are gardeners, domestics and laborers during the regular workweek. They form social networks across ethnic lines, which greatly eases any tensions that might be present. Jeffrey says:

*I went with my parents every weekend since birth and I loved it. I loved spending time with my parents, especially my Dad, and it helped build strong bonds within the family. My older brothers helped out and [when I was able], I helped with the unloading, carrying and setting up of merchandise. Later on, I called out to attract customers and helped with sales. Sometimes, I worked for other vendors to earn extra dollars for my family and myself. As a teenager, I got uncomfortable about the merchandise (women's underwear) and later struck out on my own by working in a movie theater, which upset my parents.*

Jeffrey's parents had taken great risk to come to the U.S. Fleeing from the chaos in El Salvador, they hired a “coyote” to bring them across the border with his mother riding “shotgun” and his father concealed in a compartment under the vehicle. They worked hard in this country doing unskilled labor to provide a future for their children and eventually gained citizenship after the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. The “swap” business was a way for them to earn extra dollars to send Jeffrey to private school that began his journey to urban planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

His parents clearly saw education as a gateway to the American Dream although their own limited formal education inhibited them from guiding Jeffrey through the education process. But their message was clear, “Never give up and finish the journey that we have struggled to begin.” And, clearly, he is well on his way in this journey. At the time he was interviewed, Jeffrey was completing his master's in Urban Planning at MIT. After he graduates, he intends to return to his roots in Los Angeles to work with the immigrant community in economic and urban development. “I want to give back. I have a foot in both worlds. I am a U.S. citizen and I can navigate the U.S. systems and I have knowledge about urban development. But I also know the Latin American community, the language, and I can gain trust. I can be the mentor that I never had and a voice for the immigrant community.”

reason for relocating. Similarly, **Sokha** notes how her parents felt “a sense of pride” when she graduated with her first master’s degree in public health from Boston University in 2004. **Sokha** is pursuing a second master’s in school psychology. She explains how her mother, who recently retired after 20 years of owning several different businesses in the Lowell area, strongly believes that holding a master’s or a doctorate would “automatically” gain the respect of other people. Like many immigrant parents, **Sokha’s** mother appears to view education as a way of bypassing racial inequalities in the United States.

A sense of stability is as important to the participants as to their parents and families. Growing up in an immigrant household where their parents owned a business, many children recall that, for long periods of time, their parents’ did not have any type of life insurance or retirement plan. As a result, this greatly influenced most of the participants to find a job that included a benefit package. Also, a number of the individuals note that their parents’ desire for them to pursue graduate and professional degrees was not simply to have a high-paying job but rather to be able to hold a “stable” job. In other words, most of these parents viewed a graduate or professional degree as creating stability and security, which they often found elusive in their own experiences.

**Brian**, originally from Hawaii, was admitted to a master’s engineering program at the time of this research. His mother immigrated to Hawaii from Hong Kong to pursue a college degree and then earned an MBA from the University of Maryland. As a single-mother raising three children, **Brian’s** mother has always emphasized the importance of “security and stability” to her children but has also let them decide what they want to do. For instance, **Brian** has a deep interest in photography and ballroom dancing; however, realizing the uncertainty of a stable career path in these two fields, he views them as “hobbies.” This realization came to him especially after graduating from college and gaining some work experience. He elaborates:

*At one point, I considered doing [those] as my career, but you have to be really, really good at that point in order to make it. That kind of career path is harder... living from payment to payment. There [are] all these*

*kinds of things that I looked at, but I guess right now, [at] this early stage in my life, I need security more than anything, which is why I decided to go into my graduate program.*

Now, since he is able to earn an income, **Brian** can actively pursue these “hobbies.” It is important to note that **Brian’s** response was more reflective of students in their early 20s. As a result, their age served as a factor in that, for them, other career possibilities and options were viable things to consider for the future.

Other participants note that their parents did not simply want their children to have financial stability and security but also long-term job security and stability. **Andrea** explains how her parents equate independence with not only being able to make money but also being able to have a stable job for life, and “they feel that comes with the degree.” For instance, **Andrea’s** younger sister is in medical school. **Andrea** notes how her parents did not push her sister to go into a certain medical field, such as surgery or radiology or anything that makes a lot of money. Rather, they viewed the medical doctor profession as a whole as being stable. Her parents’ views came from owning their business for the past 25 years, which **Andrea** notes is “a lot of hard work.” She states:

*I guess they feel if they were more educated, maybe they wouldn’t have to work as hard or their hard work would have [meant] more money or more prestige. Running a gas station takes a lot of effort... [a]nd so that’s why my parents and family in general [gave] a huge push towards graduate school.*

Based on their own experiences, **Andrea’s** parents expected their children to pursue graduate school in hopes their children would not have to face similar challenges.

At the same time, the value of the graduate degree also depends on the kind of profession. For the parents, engineering, medicine and business all represent stability. **Andrea**, for instance, although she is pursuing a master’s in public health at a top university, indicates that her parents assume that she will apply to medical school afterwards. Six of the participants were either pursuing or recently completed their master’s in public health however, most of their parents did not know or



understand what the degree meant and what kind of jobs were available. For instance, **Gwen**'s father responded with, "They give a degree for that? Is that a master's? What is that?" after she explained the degree and profession to him.

Decisions about entering graduate school or pursuing a particular career, while as we have seen were often influenced by parents, were also often the product of much more practical assessments. For example, the limited job opportunities and opportunities for career growth resulted in a number of the participants' deciding to pursue graduate school. Generally speaking, they all view a graduate degree as providing them with greater stability, security and opportunities. Many explain that having a bachelor's degree today does not provide a lot of job opportunities. The following comments were highlighted throughout the discussions: "You are really limited with a bachelor's degree in terms of fewer job options and making money." "I saw it first-hand when I tried to get a good job with my bachelor's. It just didn't work out." "I want to have more professional freedom and recognition." These individuals often had worked a couple of years after their bachelor degrees prior to entering their graduate programs. Through their prior work experience, these individuals did not see themselves "devoting [their] lives" in the particular position. As a result, the prior work experience had some influence on their decisions to pursue a graduate education.

**Evelyn**, a 1.5-generation student finishing her last year of law school, comments on how it is "kind of impossible to find a job with a BA right now." Prior to entering law school, **Evelyn** worked in human resources at a large insurance company. While she "could maybe envision a career path there," the work was "repetitive" for her. Therefore, "I want to challenge myself," says **Evelyn**. Additionally, like others, **Evelyn** sees graduate school as "a fast track" of achieving her goals. She elaborates:

*...it's like, do you really want to do this for another 20 years? I guess that's the other thing. Let's say I pursue the H.R., eventually [I] could be the V.P. of something, but that takes a lot longer than going to school, and it's really a fast track to doing something more challenging, more intellectually stimulating and seemingly more important.*

**Tai**, a second-year medical student at Boston University, worked two years as a clinical research assistant after graduating with a chemistry degree in 2006. He "did not like it too much" and explains the kind of work he was doing was "blah" since it was repetitive and limited in terms of growth opportunities.

**Maribel**, who completed an MBA with an emphasis in human resources management, feels that the degree was a way "to get ahead," especially, she states, "being a minority and a woman I needed something to stand out a bit more." **Maribel**'s testimonies of having to try even harder because of one's race and gender are echoed by **Malaya**. **Malaya** grew up playing soccer in California. She remembers how the other teams, who were "all White teams," would "call us names and tell us we don't belong in this league." Through this experience, she realized at an early age that she had to pave her own way and that "school is going to get you there" because "it was very obvious from being Mexican" that she "wasn't going to get acceptance automatically to the places that could get you wherever you wanted to go." **Malaya** views a graduate education as opening more doors for her and for her family. "The only way to move up is working several years in the field and working your way up," she asserts, "or go to grad school, go to law school and you'll get there quick...and you'll get the money that you need."

For some parents, while acknowledging the often harsh struggles to establish and run their businesses, advanced education was perceived as a means not to escape entrepreneurship but to make it easier to become an entrepreneur. In addition, part of the reward of owning a business, in this view, is the independence and stability accompanying ownership. **Adriana**, for example, explains how her father "struggled a lot to get to the place where he finally was able to start his business." Having worked from the bottom of the ladder as a dishwasher and later a window installer and after having "climbed his way up," it was "very important" to **Adriana**'s father that she become her own boss. According to her father, even though there have been challenges in owning a business, he still appreciates not having to answer to anybody and views working for someone else as "extremely awful." "In his mind," **Adriana** explains, "higher education means higher likelihood of becoming your own boss." As a result, there has been a "big push" for **Adriana** to become

her own boss because her father noted “we just don’t want you to have to go through all those low-paying jobs and being yelled at.” Viewed in this way, entrepreneurship is equated with a certain kind of freedom and independence.

### *“I didn’t get here alone”*

#### Parents as inspirations

Whether transmitted directly or indirectly, the students collectively feel that their parents’ views and experiences are the main explanations for why they chose to pursue advanced higher education. Furthermore, almost all of the students note how they were inspired by their immigrant parents and how that influenced them as well. Comments about parents like **Evelyn**’s in the previous section and “they have sacrificed their weekends, and they spend all the time working so that we can have all the comforts that we want” are common.

**Gwen**, the youngest of three children and a second-generation Korean American from southern California, notes that while she has not been directly involved in her father’s textile manufacturing business, she believes that her father’s work ethic and drive have “definitely inspired” her and her older siblings. **Gwen**’s dad, who came to the United States in 1980 from South Korea, was an employee at the company for a number of years before purchasing it seven years ago when he was in his late 50s. Through seeing how her father was able to own a business at an older age, **Gwen** realizes anything is possible in life. Her leaving California and familiar surroundings for graduate studies was a hard decision especially since she is away from her parents. Through watching her immigrant parents, she was inspired, however, to realize her ambition of attending graduate school out-of-state.

Others, like **Evelyn**, echo **Gwen**’s sentiments. She describes her family’s livelihood in central China as “very stable” where her father owned and operated a “pretty established business.” At the same time, her parents

decided to immigrate to the United States when they were in their late 30s not knowing any English. She notes how her father’s positive outlook in life and “ambitions” of wanting more for himself and his family have had a significant impact on her life choices and confidence. As a result, she “always tries to do more and expand [her] horizon.” For example, despite the high unemployment rate and hiring freezes across the nation at the time she was interviewed in 2010, **Evelyn** is not concerned about job opportunities. “Should I get fired tomorrow, I’ll go look for another job,” she says “I have a college degree, and I will soon have a law degree. I can make it on my own. I will find something.”

**Sam**’s college graduation was “a great moment” for him and his family because his mom, who did not attend college, walked with him during the commencement ceremony. **Sam**, a master’s student en route to a PhD in ethics and philosophy of religion, poignantly relates how the ceremony symbolized a collective process because “[he] didn’t get [t]here alone.” Instead, his parents’ encouragement and motivation throughout the years played key roles in his accomplishments and had a significant influence in his decision to pursue graduate school.

**Sam** explains that his parents owned a small sandwich shop in southern California for two years. Before that, they owned a liquor store. The sandwich shop was going “really well,” until one of the businesses in the area that supplied fifty percent of the customers relocated to another state in the early 1990s and business plummeted “almost overnight.” After the sandwich shop closed, his father worked several jobs. Eventually, he became a manager of a health food market before returning to school to pursue a master’s and then a doctorate in religious ministry. **Sam**’s mother has been doing alterations for different Korean-owned dry cleaners since their sandwich shop closed and has provided critical financial and emotional support to the family especially when **Sam**’s father decided to return to school.

**Sam** makes it clear that he did not feel “pressured” by his parents regarding graduate school. His dad’s “constant pushing of himself trying to do school as long as he could” as well as his mom’s constantly doing difficult work, Sam states, inspired him to further his own education. He explains this in detail:

*It’s more like, “Wow, he’s [my dad] always studying. I wonder why.”... For me, I respect my dad so much. I think being able to see him do that was kind of “why is he studying?” When he talks about certain things, he always references a particular thing he learned or, if he didn’t, where did he get that from, so just a lot of sort of these internal questions that I always had, so there’s that. My mom, especially, her not being able to go to college also influenced me... [T]hey also kind of left it open to me to figure out and trust that I figure out what I want to do. So I think it’s the collection of those things that kind of led me to grad school.*

The experiences and sentiments of **Gwen**, **Evelyn** and **Sam** related above were universally shared by others and reflect deep appreciation for parents as inspirational figures in their lives.

### Class and cultural clashes: Differences in parental support

We found that while parents held high expectations for their children to succeed academically and viewed higher education as a necessity to a better life, some of the parents lacked the dominant cultural resources. In other words, these parents are unable to “help them translate those aspirations into reality” (Louie, 2004, p. 95). As a result, students from low-income and working-class immigrant families tend to feel that they are on their own in trying to navigate the American educational system (Lee, 2005; Lew, 2003; Louie, 2004; Wong, 2008b). “Though most Chinese immigrant families see higher education as a necessary safeguard against potential racial discrimination,” Louie asserts, “class differences do indeed shape the students’ different paths to college” (2004, p. xxv). For example, parents of the Columbia University students in her study were mostly from middle-class suburban America and expected their children to attend Ivy League institutions. Their parents

were able to help them with the college application process, e.g., visiting different college campuses, filling out the applications and writing the application essay. On the other hand, while the parents of the Hunter College students who were from working-class, ethnic enclaves encouraged them to go to college, they were unable to help their children with this process.

Similarly, while all of the parents discussed in this study own or owned a business, class differences were apparent among them that manifested themselves in areas such as the ability to provide their children with educationally useful resources. As a second-year law student, **Felipe** notes his parents always expected him to “get good grades,” but they never explained what that process entailed because they did not have the resources or did not understand the American educational system:

*For me it was like a general message, “Oh you have to do good, you have to get good grade scores, you have to do this and that,” but with no like real guidance. I think [for] people without immigrant parents it’s like, oh you know, they buy them the test prep, the college student over at the mansion teaching them and getting them ready early, you know, like grooming them.*

On the other hand, while some of the participants’ parents did not understand the education system, they were able to provide the financial resources or were connected with a network of support. For instance, **Adriana**’s parents expected her to pursue college and graduate school. However, similar to Louie’s work (2004) with the working-class Chinese families, they did not know what the process entailed. At the same time, **Adriana**’s parents, like some of the other parents, had the financial resources to support her. For instance, they were able to enroll her in a private school with a strong college-bound emphasis. In general, this tends to be more common for those parents who hold at least a college degree either from their native country or the United States. They were also more likely to have achieved middle- to upper-middle-class status.

Additionally, while class differences exist, all of the participants appear to have attended well-funded public and private high schools where the majority of their



## Karmin Cortes

Master's in Educational Leadership and Policy, University of Maryland, College Park  
Parents' country of origin: Mexico

*My parents feel guilty that they depended on my labor in their restaurant when I was young. But, looking back, it was the best thing they could have done for me. Now I appreciate the bumps, hurdles and challenges in life and [the need] to be responsible and value education. [As a kid,] I was resentful. Although our house was small, we lived in an affluent area, and all my friends had big houses and cars and didn't have to work.*

The restaurant business is hard. Karmin's family from Mexico started a restaurant business in Clarksville, Maryland, where they bought a two-table pizza place and converted it into a Mexican restaurant. They were, in fact, among the first to capitalize on the craze for Mexican restaurants fueled by the building boom in the early 1990s that created a substantial customer base. The business grew from only her parents to 15 employees, and today stands at 250 employees spread across six restaurants.

*In the beginning, I was at the restaurant just to be watched over. As I got older, I was expected to put my labor in by cleaning, stocking or doing whatever chores needed doing. My older sister was already waitressing, and I started waitressing and being a hostess in the tenth grade working every weekend. My Mom was very strong about wanting me to get an education and have better opportunities. But she and my father were not sophisticated in the process. My applications to college were haphazard, and with no one to mentor me I lost focus. It was only with some assistance from my brother that I finally attended college. After I graduated from the University of Maryland at College Park, only then did I really get focused. I realized that I owed it to my parents to continue my education, and the opportunity [for graduate school] was there because of their hard work.*

*I took an advising job and it brought back an interest I had in social work. I really enjoyed working with struggling students; I know what it is like to be there.*

A friend encouraged Karmin to pursue a graduate degree in educational leadership and policy, which she did part-time. In this, she focused on guiding underserved students through the college maze. But her gaze extends to such programs as Upward Bound and Academic Achievement. "That's a place where I think I can be creative, where my voice would be influential and where I could really make a difference."

peers pursued college. Higher education was the expected norm for many of the participants especially since their schools centered on a college-bound curriculum. For instance, everyone at **Betty's** high school took the SATs. She observes, "No one doesn't take the SATs; if you didn't take the SATs, you were the one who was the sore thumb." Similarly, **Chun Hei** reflects on her high school experience:

*...the area that we live in, everyone went to college. So it wasn't even a question. When I graduated high school, everyone applied to college. It was almost odd if you weren't applying to college because it was like, "What are you going to do then?"*

**Patricia**, who attended a Catholic high school, notes how her school's emphasis on higher education "really pushed" her to focus and consider college:

*The school environment was what really pushed me to continue studying and so forth. In high school, it was expected that you were going to college. These are the things you need to do, and I received most of my information from school.*

Another student, **Leah**, explains that the schools she went to growing up prepared her for university.

The type of school community matters since students felt "prepared" and the message of higher education was expressed very early on. **Malaya** attended a Catholic high school where the largest student populations were Latino/as and Asians. At that school, she reflects, "it was normal to go to college, and it was normal to see Latinos and Asians going to college," which "made it easier." Her statement also emphasizes that college is possible for students of color and students from immigrant families. For many of the participants, their school and district offered a wealth of resources such as Advanced Placement classes, college preparations and various clubs and organizations for their students. College resources and access were more easily available to them such as the ability to purchase or access the necessary materials (e.g., test preparation classes, tuition, expenses, etc.).

It also appears that parents in these communities had a higher expectation for their children to pursue graduate and professional degrees. A couple of the participants mention that their parents expected them to complete graduate degrees because, as **Andrea** explains, "you haven't completed your education with only a bachelor's." **Leah** notes how her family had a strong influence in her decision to pursue graduate school since "the majority of [her] family has graduate degrees." Obviously, these high expectations meant that for some students "the pressure was felt early on."

As mentioned earlier, some individuals were a part of their family businesses while growing up. For instance, **Elaine** helped out at her parents' take-out business since she was old enough to work. While growing up, she felt her life was different than those of her peers from her predominately White middle- to upper-middle-class town. Instead of hanging out with friends or joining activities at the school, she was needed at home and the business. Being the oldest child, **Elaine** was also responsible for her three younger siblings. As a result, she viewed her life as "hard" and "horrible" when growing up. It was not until college that she realized her life was "not really that hard" and began to question her own privilege. Through conversations with other college peers, she began to understand her own privilege of "having this source of income from [her] family or this network and this place to go to hang out other than my home."

It is important to point out that while most of their parents attended college, their degrees were from outside the United States. Therefore, these children of immigrants are the ones learning the American educational system. The following comment from **Lynda** pinpoints the difference:

*As for my mom telling me how to apply to college, she didn't know how. It was a learning experience... to learn for myself how to do things as opposed to my mother telling me how to do things because she got her degree elsewhere and not in the U.S.*

**Andrea** also notes that her parents were not able to help her and her siblings during their college application process. However, she was able to rely on her cousin, who was seven years older than she. **Andrea** elaborates:

*I really, really depended on an older cousin. He's seven years older than me and so he was old enough that he still knew the application procedure and everything like that, but young enough that he [could] communicate with me and I would accept it. He was kind of like the older brother that I never had but did have. To this day, my mother's very grateful toward that aunt. She shows it all the time because she feels almost like "my kids wouldn't have gone to college if your son wasn't there." And he did help me a lot. I would admit it any day and any time. I didn't really know where to apply. It really helps that someone's there who's already done it.*

Therefore, given the limited resources of their immigrant parents, a few of the participants in this research learned to form what Lew in her research on Korean American youth describes as "second-generation ethnic networks" that "provide access to bicultural and bilingual institutional agents to help them achieve academically" (2003, p. 171). **Nicolas** realized early on "you have limited resources and so you pull from everywhere. You think of creative ways to achieve the same results."

It is apparent that the parents in this study regarded higher education as necessary for their children to live better lives. Materially assisting their children to achieve that education, however, especially for parents who did not attend college or who attended foreign colleges was often difficult. It leads to what Louie has described as frustration in the parents' abilities to "help them translate those aspirations into reality" (2004, p. 95). **Manny** explains:

*They always said, "You have to go to school. You have to get educated so that you don't go through all the things that we went through. So you have to go to college." And I think I grew up with that idea. But it was like an empty idea; it was just a form of the idea. It had no content because I didn't grow up seeing books, seeing my mother doing homework, seeing her going to college, seeing her in a nice suit going to a nice job.*

Although some of their parents were unable to advise them, the students were able to find the necessary resources. In other words, unlike many low-income and working-class immigrant families, these immigrant entrepreneur parents, for the most part, had the financial security and resources to support their children. A number of the participants spoke about their parents' paying for test preparation classes, driving them to the testing centers or hiring a tutor. Others also note that their parents' long work hours at the business resulted in paying for their undergraduate and graduate education. Generally, the graduate students in this study attended well-funded schools and/or lived in middle- to upper-middle-class communities where higher education was expected. Most of their parents also attended college.

### *The "theory of Nepantla"*

#### Growing up between two worlds

The children of immigrant entrepreneurs who participated in this study often mention the dilemmas of growing up in two worlds: their immigrant family world and their school/dominant culture world. As mentioned earlier, while their parents knew the importance of a higher education and supported them, some of these parents did not truly understand the college application process and the role of such things as entrance examinations, extra-curricular activities, Advanced Placement classes, etc. **Tiffany** remembers applying for college as a lonely and stressful period for her because her parents did not know how to help her:

*They had no idea what to do. I remember trying to ask them to fill out financial aid forms and they were like, "We have no idea. We don't understand this. You need to get some sort of extension or something." So it was frustrating that other people had that kind of assistance and understanding. Since I was the eldest child and the first person going to college, it was a tough time.*

When **Sam** was younger, he recalls trying to have the two worlds come together. Yet, no matter how hard he tried, the worlds did not join together smoothly:

*When I am at home, I am, like, "Why can't my mom and dad understand my school?" Or when I am out*

*there, “Why don’t [they] understand what I do at home?”...trying so hard to make those connections, and it didn’t really work.*

Despite the fact that these children of immigrants are grown and in graduate and professional schools, the two worlds remain very separate. **Malaya** shares what she wrote in her law school personal statement about the “theory of *Nepantla*.” “This theory of *Nepantla*, which is an Aztec word that means ‘being in between,’” she explains, speaks to her as “being in between these two worlds of your Latino peers and community versus the people you go to school with.”

While in graduate school, the participants felt that the world of their families and communities was still very relevant for them. For instance, “People just have certain connections” was a common theme. As others state:

*My family is an immigrant family and that discrepancy is more obvious when I went to grad school. It might have been a culture shock. It made me aware that I definitely stand out...I’ve definitely become more self-conscious about how I speak.*

—**Gabriela**

*In terms of my peers in grad school, there are generations of doctors who have come from this university, like my grandfather was a doctor or my mom’s father was a doctor. You have all these things and people ask you, “Were your parents’ doctors?” Nope, they weren’t. They owned a restaurant business, and I slept on rice sacks. And everyone feels awkward at first. I think that’s the harder thing: bridging that equality in the classroom. It’s the more difficult thing I’ve been facing. It kind of brings me back to when I was in elementary school and you’re thinking, “Wow, I thought I would’ve grown out of this by now.”*

—**Betty**

*Both of my parents really stress education. It was very important for us, but [there was a] lack of social connections. My peers would say, “Oh, my dad goes to the same country club as this attorney so he’s going to let me work in his office.” My dad is not a part of a country club and so he does not have these kinds of friends. I think I notice the lack of social connections and unfamiliarity in grad school.*

—**Nicolas**

Overwhelmingly, not seeing their parents was a huge factor while growing up in an immigrant entrepreneur household. Comments such as “family vacations have been very rare” were expressed several times. Schedules typified by long work hours without days off significantly impacted the perceptions of the children of immigrant entrepreneurs while growing up. For instance, one of the participants notes, “Sometimes, when I was really little, I cried myself to sleep because my mom wasn’t there.” As a result, many participants mention the importance of family time and vacations as priorities for them when they decide to start their own families. This was especially the case when both parents worked together at the business because disagreements about the business would most often be brought back to the home. **Kendra** provides this description:

*Both of my parents work at the same restaurant, and so their marital fights also come into [the home]. I think for me, through seeing my parents, work is at work and home is at home. I think I have a very high work and home separation. You know, 5:30 it’s over. I try not to be home during work hours especially seeing my parents. I think work stress puts a lot of strain on your marriage. I tend to have really high work and home boundaries. It’s really important to me that I don’t drag my work home with me.*



Since 1978, **Daniel**'s father has owned a computer components business in Taiwan with an office in Texas. While **Daniel** appreciates his father for providing a "great life" for the family, the decision was made early on not to live that kind of lifestyle. His father often traveled back and forth between the United States and Taiwan. As a result of all the traveling and meeting clients, his health had deteriorated. He elaborates:

*In what I drew from him, being so hardworking, is that in the end, family is something that is really important for me.... Even if I am a physician, [having a family would influence how much I work]. How much physicians work is directly proportional to their income. So income is not going to be this end goal—that I want to make \$400,000 a year—but rather it's something I do that I love, and I come home at five o'clock and see my kids do their homework. So that's what I took from him.*

While some of the participants did not directly work at the family business, they played other roles in the household. For instance, **Lynda** was responsible for taking care of her younger siblings during her teenage years because her mother, a single mother, worked long hours as a financial planner and real estate agent. In other words, older siblings sometimes served as second parents to their younger siblings while their parent(s) were at work. It was not until her first year in college that **Lynda** began to assist her mother with the business. Through that experience, she realized she didn't want to be "a personal financial analyst," but, at the same time, it gave her a deeper "appreciation for [her mother's] daily work." She explains:

*...my mom trained me, and she got me licensed to sell life insurance my freshman year... She had me as an office manager. But in order to understand what she did, she had me study this thick book of life insurance... I took this test, and I was licensed to sell life insurance in Illinois. I was 19 when I took the test. I wasn't obviously selling life insurance. I guess it was her way of teaching me what she does and what insurance is. A lot of people don't understand why they need life insurance so it was her way of show-*

*ing the need for what she does and that it's not just some scam that companies do. She took me out to meetings with her clients and had me present some of her presentations about how to save money.*

## **"In a position to give back"**

### **Serving families and communities**

More than half of the individuals in health-related careers (i.e., public health, clinical psychology, medicine and law) identified giving back to their families and/or serving the community as the key reasons for pursuing graduate studies. Their parents, for the most part, own restaurants and overwhelmingly did not have health insurance or any kind of benefits. As a result, several participants mentioned being uninsured while growing up as having a deep influence in their career choices. **Gwen**, for example, went into public health because her family and other similar families did not have access to healthcare coverage. The first time she had health insurance was in college because "it was mandatory." Pursuing a master's in public health has a personal connection that "just kind of hit close to home" for her.

**Dae-Hyun**, a 1.5-generation Korean American and a first-year medical student, views medicine as "stability," which is important for him. Like **Gwen**'s family, **Dae-Hyun** grew up without healthcare coverage. Moreover, he wants to give back to his parents because they gave up so much for him and his younger sister:

*They gave up their prestige, their education, their aspirations, their goals, their friends, family, relatives, their culture and their history for us. So I've got to do what I can to make sure it's worth it for them.*

It appears a deep sense of familial responsibility influenced **Dae-Hyun** to pursue medicine although his father wanted him to pursue law. Through interacting with **Dae-Hyun** mother's brothers, who were doctors, his father felt "doctors were very straight-minded and didn't have a wide view of the world," **Dae-Hyun** explains. "And his being a businessman, he didn't want his son to follow that same boring path... So he wanted me to think big and do big things."



## Son-Ca Lam

Master's candidate in Applied Linguistics, University of Massachusetts Boston  
Parents' country of origin: Vietnam

*I was born in a refugee camp in the Philippines after my parents and sister fled from Vietnam. I was only three months old when we came to Massachusetts and grew up in the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester. At first, my parents did factory jobs to survive, but my Mom heard that the nail business provided good opportunities. She worked for nail salons to learn the trade. When I was in the 10th grade, financing through family networks made it possible to buy an existing business from another Vietnamese.*

Her father has not been involved in the nail salon. He is a writer of historical and personal war studies from Vietnam written in Vietnamese that appear in Vietnamese publications. But Son-Ca and her sister were and are very involved in the business. Her sister, 16 years older, obtained a bachelor's degree in math and worked for a bank. She handles all the purchasing, billing, taxes and other paperwork for the business, which her mother cannot do because of limited English and limited education. While growing up, Son-Ca was expected to work at the salon every weekend doing reception and assisting with paperwork and other chores.

The salon is open seven days a week. "My Mom only knows one business model—work harder and longer than anyone else. The business has been a strain. She couldn't be involved in my education because she had no leisure time and limited English. I saw this as non-interest." Son-Ca's sister urged her mother to adopt business management practices for greater efficiency but to no avail. Nevertheless, the business thrived enough to support the entire family and "seeing how hard my Mom worked made me work hard in school," Son-Ca says.

"My parents were both very traumatized by the war experience in Vietnam. They were not open to talking about family and what happened. I remember hating to do family trees in school because I didn't know the family history." But Son-Ca could be involved in Vietnamese language, history and culture through bilingual classes she attended through grade four, and she remembers this as a highly positive experience. "For me," says Son-Ca, "English immersion [instead of bilingual education] is a political issue. Too many kids fall through the cracks."

This has led Son-Ca to her current graduate work in Applied Linguistics at the University of Massachusetts Boston where her studies overlap language/education issues with economics and politics. For example, she mapped the 280 Vietnamese nail salons in Boston that command over 80 percent of the nail business. She found that all of these businesses are located in non-Vietnamese neighborhoods and often follow a Vietnamese cultural practice of clumping like businesses together. They see this as an advantage rather than a competitive disadvantage. At the time she was interviewed, Son-Ca was working on the "Drawing Democracy Project" for political re-districting in Massachusetts at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

"I always want to be in Dorchester. I want to contribute and give back to the community where I grew up." In the meantime, her Mom continues to expect her to help out at the nail salon.

Overall, doing well in school meant that their parents' sacrifices were worth something and that it fulfills, as Louie characterizes it, "at least one hope of their parents' journey to the United States" (2004, p. 126).

In general, most of the participants expressed a deep commitment to giving back and serving their families and communities after completing their graduate or professional degrees. A few expressed the desire to take care of their parents when they retire, even though, as **Yvonne** notes, "they don't expect me to give anything back." This sense of caring for your elders resonated with both the 1.5- and second-generation Asian Americans and Latina/os. Similarly, **Nicolas**, who is a first-year law student at Boston College, mentions that "there's an absolute understanding that when they get older, they will live with me or my brother or at least live on the same street or at least we are financially supportive." **Nicola's** grandparents live with one of his uncles and thus, like many others have expressed, "it is an unspoken rule and understanding" to care for your elders. **Adriana** summarizes this view by stating simply, "everybody lives in everybody's homes because nobody is left out."

The students' passion for honoring their families extended to serving their communities as well. After graduating from college, **Malaya** worked as a domestic violence case manager and counselor for two years. During that time, she kept analyzing how she "could make social change" in her community and, thus, felt graduate school provided a nice fit for what she wanted in life. Even if she decides not to practice as an attorney in the future, **Malaya** notes a JD would offer more opportunities for her. For **Malaya**, getting her law degree has an even broader significance: "It's a step for my community because I can help my community."

**Elaine** found out that she has gained admission into a doctoral program in counseling psychology. For two years she worked at a non-profit organization that serves predominately low-income and working-class Chinese

American youth. She explains the importance of giving back: "My parents benefited a lot from what was offered to them" in the community when they immigrated in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, **Elaine** "definitely feel[s] indebted to the community at large." Similarly, as recent immigrants, **Gwen's** parents received help from the community. As a result, for as long as she can remember, her father has always stressed the importance of giving back. **Gwen** elaborates:

*My dad always stressed, "When we came here we had nothing, and we received help from people. Now, when you're in a position to give back, you definitely need to do that and to recognize you wouldn't be here without the help of other people," so keep that cycle going.*

For some students the sense of responsibility extends to future generations. While growing up, **Jason** remembers not having Latina/o teachers during his K-12 education. As a result, **Jason**, who started a master's in education, hopes to give back and to be a positive role model to the younger generation through teaching. Like others in this study, a sense of reciprocity and serving one's community was ingrained by his parents at a young age.

### Thoughts on becoming entrepreneurs

The responses to inquiries about the possibility of these children of immigrant business owners becoming entrepreneurs themselves encompass a wide spectrum. While some do see themselves opening their own business in their respective fields, others do not especially after growing up with the family business.

Running a business, in terms of handling the management and administrative components, is attractive to some participants, but they do not want to immerse themselves in the business as did their parents. Despite her parents' desire for her to use her education to "become her own boss," **May**, a pharmacy student, explains:

*Even if I want to own a restaurant some day, I just don't want to own a restaurant like my parents', like they did it. I don't want to have it [the business] take over my life in a way where I can't live my life [fully]. The point of having a business is to enhance my life not to take away from it. That's what I learned from them [my parents], that life is not about spending your time somewhere and making you have to take away from enjoying your family. I think of the days when we didn't have the restaurant, my parents would take us out on road trips, picnics and stuff. Even though it wasn't anything big, it was quality time as a kid. Once they had the restaurant, we didn't do that anymore. It was always separated. The business always had to run.*

**Evelyn** mentions that while owning a business equals success in the United States, she has no interest in heading in that direction. She states, "They say the only way to be wealthy in America is to have your own business. You can be a lawyer, doctor and you'll be in the upper-middle-class, but to be wealthy you have to have your own business. Yet it's not worth it." Many of the participants indicate that they have "no interest" in owning their own business in the future. "No, no, no business for me," comments **Manny**. "If you want to become a slave for life then you get a business," he adds jokingly.

A number of the women participants, who were in their mid- to late 20s and 30s, expressed the view that becoming an entrepreneur sounded attractive as a possibility later in their lives. For instance, **Maribel**, the daughter of Salvadoran immigrants, truly enjoys photography and has been shooting weddings on the side. At the moment, she intends to keep her "day job" in human resource management although opening her own photo studio is potentially an attractive option.

She says:

*Right now, I like my paycheck, like every couple of weeks, working at an office. So I wouldn't give that up to open up my own photo studio or anything like that right now, but maybe down the line when I want to have kids and stuff like that, I can see having a business in your home and raising your kids that would help. And I would have that to fall back on if I needed to get a job, like a side job.*

Some students showed interest in or were open to considering owning a business based on their better understanding of entrepreneurship through their parents' businesses.

The prospect of these children of immigrants returning to their parents' roots and down the road owning enterprises of their own tends to be more likely for the women. For these individuals, entrepreneurship is viewed as a way of bridging their home and work lives.



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION





The graduate and professional school students who participated in this study provide valuable information on immigrant family businesses. Additionally, those children of immigrant entrepreneurs, through their openness and insight, spoke eloquently about their experiences growing up in immigrant households active in these businesses. Clearly, the educational and career choices of these students were influenced in diverse ways by their parents, families and ethnic communities. Overall, however, there is little doubt that these children understood, respected and were often deeply affected by the struggles and accomplishments of their parents. Although there were some unique elements relative to being raised in an immigrant entrepreneur environment, these students profoundly articulate a more universal appreciation of what it means to be children of immigrants.

The businesses with which students in this study were associated were ones in which at least one parent was involved full-time and the other parent worked either full- or part-time. These businesses were generally small, ranging in size from two employees (usually the parents) to more than ten employees. Restaurants and catering companies were dominant.

The reasons for starting these enterprises varied. Some businesses were regarded as temporary options especially for parents who were “between jobs.” Others saw the businesses as providing an additional source of income. Still others believed that, given barriers such as limited English language capabilities, self-employment was their only option. Some entrepreneurs entered into businesses frustrated by their inability to pursue professions in the United States that were consistent with their educational training. A few of the businesses took advantage of family ties where, for instance, newly arrived immigrants were able to join with established family members involved in business.

Among the most vivid memories of several students are those that focused on the interconnections between their home lives and the family business. For these students, the business environment was like a second home where many hours were spent. The

involvement of the children in the actual operation of the businesses varied considerably ranging from learning virtually every aspect of the enterprise to minimal participation. Parents differed in their approaches to the direct involvement of their children. Some encouraged this involvement especially with tasks that involved direct contact with customers in businesses such as restaurants and daycare facilities. In several cases, the children, who often possessed more advanced English language skills than their parents, served as vital language brokers. Other parents consciously shielded their children from assuming any roles in the business particularly from activities that involved manual exertion.

In the discussion on how being raised in an immigrant entrepreneur family influenced educational and career choices, the students agreed that the importance of education was a deeply held value in their homes. Whether communicated directly in messages from parents to children or recognized more indirectly through the example set by parents, the students in this study understood and in the long run acknowledged their parents’ desires and advice about the need to pursue advanced studies. Many parents, according to their children, viewed education as a vehicle for respect and stability as well as advancement. In some cases, parents perceived advanced education as a vital factor in their children’s own pursuit of an entrepreneurial path that would result in the independence accompanying business ownership.

Nearly all of the students gained inspiration from the lives and examples of their parents. The work ethic and drive of immigrant entrepreneur parents was not lost on their children. The students were also keenly aware of the sacrifices made by their parents, and this recognition motivated them to pursue higher levels of education as a form of recognition and repayment.

As immigrants, the parents and their children often found differences in their abilities to navigate the education process at all levels. Some students were able to attend schools that prepared them well for higher education while others were in settings that were less well-equipped to support student aspirations.

In general, many students mention the complexities of growing up in two worlds: the first comprised their immigrant families and ethnic communities and the second was marked by the world outside of their homes and communities including the schools they attended. This meant, for example, that for some parents the college application process and test preparation programs proved to be perplexing. The students occupied an “in-between” status. They often felt that their parents did not fully understand their engagement in the world of school and, in turn, those on the outside had little understanding of the lives of their families.

As children of immigrant entrepreneurs, the students in this study had varying views on becoming business owners themselves. For some, the idea was appealing while for others the possibility was rejected. There was much greater consensus among the students on their choice to pursue careers in areas such as medicine, law and public health and a desire to give back to their families and communities. This deep sense of familial and community responsibility permeates the students’ discussions. It is the most striking and important tie linking the experiences and sacrifices of parents and their communities to the aspirations of their children.

# Appendix A: Methodology

## Recruitment of subjects

The main method of recruitment was email correspondence to various individuals and listservs, e.g., student organizations; community-based organizations; non-profit, pan-ethnic, professional organizations; university graduate departments; and centers and institutions in the Greater Boston area, Lawrence and Amherst. Professors were among those contacted to assist with recruitment. In addition, the research project was introduced to various individuals and groups during community events. Some participants in later focus group sessions learned about the project from participants who had taken part in an earlier session.

## Focus groups

Since we wanted to provide an interactive group setting where participants were free to share and dialogue with each other, focus groups were an appropriate component for this research. The primary forms of data collection, therefore, consisted of focus groups and a brief background information survey filled out by participants. A total of ten focus group sessions were held at the University of Massachusetts Boston from January to July 2009. Each focus group had no more than five participants. Sessions lasted two to two-and-a-half hours. Each of the focus group sessions was auto-recorded and transcribed. At the beginning of each focus group, a consent form was distributed and participants were told that they did not need to respond to questions with which they were uncomfortable and could withdraw from the study at any time.

## Participant demographics

A total of 36 children of Asian and Latina/o immigrant entrepreneurs participated in the research (**see Participant Information on page 14**). There were 26 Asian Americans and 10 Latina/os. The top three ethnicities were Chinese (n = 8), Korean (n = 6) and Mexican (n = 4) respectively, followed by Filipino and Taiwanese (n = 3 each). Thirteen of the participants were from Massachusetts while 23 were out-of-state residents. The largest contingent came from California (n = 10) and all had been living in Massachusetts for at least one year. Twelve of the graduate students were 1.5-generation, and 24 were second-generation. However, while several participants came to the United States between the ages of eight and 11, the majority came at a very young age, i.e., before the age of five. Their ages ranged from 21 to 32 years old with the largest age group being 24 years old (n = 10). Twenty-five of the children of immigrants were female and 11 were male.

## Footnotes

1 Participants have been given pseudonyms.

2 There were at least 15 respondents who initially expressed interest in the research; however, they later withdrew because they were away during the times of the focus groups or had a scheduling conflict.

3 1.5-generation refers to children of immigrants who have arrived in the U.S. before the age of 12.

4 Second-generation refers to children of immigrants who were born in the U.S.

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