



Advantage Rule:

The Assimilation Experiences of Starfinder Immigrant Youth

August 2012



Introduction

The often iterated descriptions of the United States (U.S.) as a melting pot and a nation of immigrants are clichés rooted in truth. Although the issue of immigration is currently a highly contentious topic this election year, the U.S. has a unique historical narrative because it has been shaped by waves of immigrants from all corners of the world. While the current discourse on immigration focuses on the legal pathways for undocumented immigrants and the politics of enforcing immigration law, what is often omitted from this discussion are the personal accounts of immigrants as they transition and assimilate in their newly adopted country. This concept paper briefly discusses the process of assimilation most immigrants undergo, and includes the assimilation experiences of several young immigrants living in the Philadelphia area.

Immigration in Philadelphia

Like most metropolitan cities in the U.S., the Greater Philadelphia region has witnessed an increase in its foreign-born population. In 2010, the number of individuals who were not U.S. citizens at birth reached 563,603, which is an increase of nearly 40 percent from a decade ago.¹ Given that approximately 10 percent of the Greater Philadelphia region’s population is comprised of foreign-born immigrants, it is important to better understand this subset of the population, for their assimilation into Philadelphia’s society will undoubtedly have a significant macro and micro level impact.

Over the past thirty years, the demographic composition of immigrants has changed drastically. Although Europeans historically comprised the majority of the region’s immigrants prior to the 1980s, since the year 2000, most foreign-born individuals are originally from Asia and Latin America, with India, Mexico, and China representing the top three countries of origin. Figure 1 illustrates these ongoing changes in the ethnic composition of the region’s immigrant population, while Figure 2 highlights the significant increase in the foreign-born population over the last thirty years.²

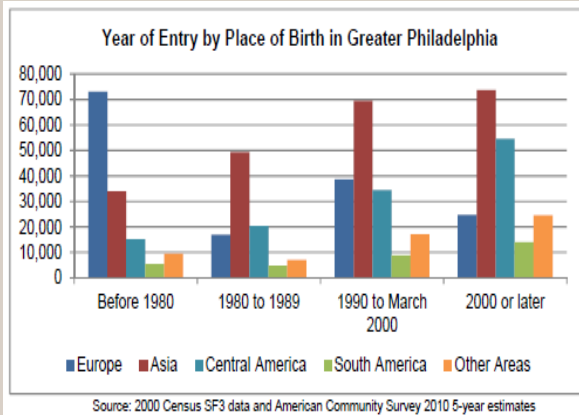


Figure 1: Changes in the ethnic composition of immigrants²

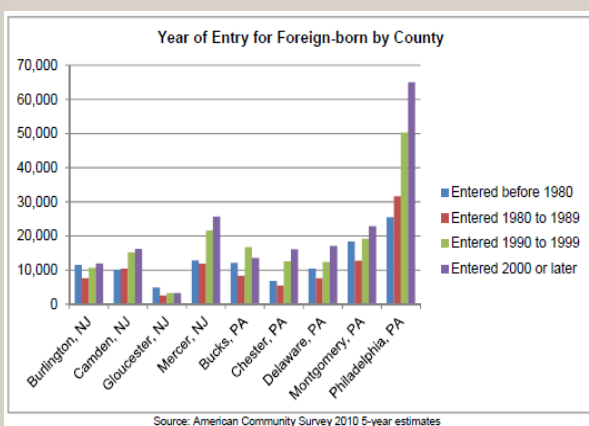


Figure 2: Increase of immigrant population over the last 30 years²

Assimilation in America

Due to highly politicized rhetoric around the issue of immigration, there is a general ambivalence in discussing any related or tangential topics. For some, the immigration debate is solely an issue of economic impact, whereas for others, it is framed by social and cultural concerns. Although both schools of thought are justified and accurate in their contextualization of the issue, the process of assimilation is often introduced under the social and cultural framework, for it is most evident in daily interpersonal interactions.

To many people, assimilation simply means ‘becoming white’. This misrepresentation of the assimilation process is in part due to historical definitions that describe it as a “process of adjustment and accommodation which occurs between the members of different races, if their contact is prolonged and if the necessary psychic conditions are present. The result is group homogeneity to a greater or less degree.”³ But as the demographics of the nation continue to change, naturally, so too does the process of assimilation. Some contemporary definitions of the process remain relatively nebulous, so as to reflect the demographic transition the U.S. is currently undergoing, while others provide specific actions that reflect the process. One simple, yet poignant definition of assimilation describes the process as:

“Beginning to think of yourself as American.... It also means learning to identify yourself as American. It means learning about the civics and history of this nation, learning to respect the rule of law, learning to accept all of the traditions that are part of this great nation. It means tolerance.”⁴

Despite the differing definitions of assimilation, one uniform characteristic of the process is that it is gradual and occurs over an extended period of time. This process can be mitigated or catalyzed by social factors such as one’s age upon arrival, the community in which one is located, one’s socioeconomic and employment status, one’s openness to intermarriage, one’s language proficiency, and the nature of enacted laws and policies. In addition, there are organizations that explicitly support immigrants in the assimilation process by providing an array of services that address their social, cultural, religious, and linguistic needs.⁵

Starfinder Foundation

Although there are various local organizations that specialize in supporting immigrant populations, there are also some organizations that are sought out by immigrants for various reasons. One such organization is Starfinder Foundation, a youth development organization based in the Philadelphia neighborhood of Manayunk. Founded in 2002, Starfinder provides “soccer, educational, and personal development programs” to underserved communities in the area.⁶

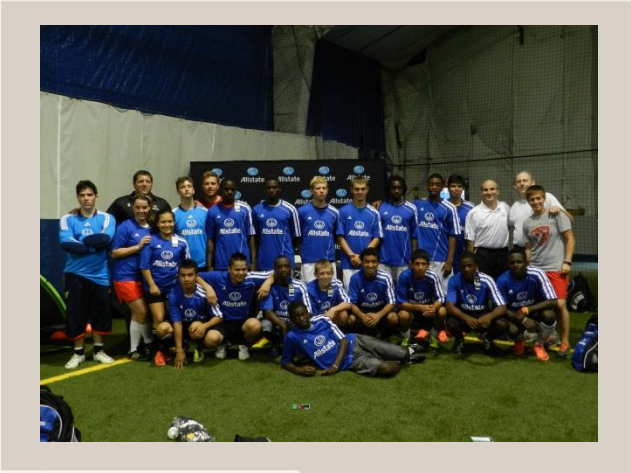
While Starfinder does not explicitly serve immigrant youth, the fact that the majority of youth enrolled in its several programs are immigrants, indicates that the organization’s mission reflects their values and provides enrichment that goes beyond the health and wellness opportunities associated with playing soccer. In describing what makes Starfinder unique, Stephen Baumann, the President & CEO, stated that:

“We use soccer as a hook, to engage kids and build the culture here. It’s really about mutual respect and building character, leadership, community service. All the kids who are here are kids who have a passion for soccer.”⁷

When an organization such as Starfinder is actively sought out by immigrant youth, it is important to identify what specific qualities are attractive to this group. In fact, failing to capture this phenomenon not only ignores an important aspect of the assimilation process that these youth are experiencing, but it is also a missed opportunity to learn how to better serve this unique population.



In their 2012 Preliminary Assessment Report, Starfinder conducted a survey that gathered data from 323 participants ranging from the ages of 9-18 years old. The baseline results indicated that not only did Starfinder participants enjoy the program, but they also “displayed relatively high levels of diversity recognition and assimilation, characterized by 88% of respondents identifying the importance of respecting different cultural values and beliefs.”⁸



In addition, “empathy and sympathy were also prevalent characteristics” for 85% of respondents stated that “they want to help people that are being taken advantage of.”⁹ These seemingly insignificant findings become incredibly important when viewed within the framework of assimilation. As previously discussed, the process of assimilation not only means “learning about the civics and history of this nation,” but more importantly, “it means tolerance.”¹⁰ The fact that immigrant youth who participate in Starfinder programs report relatively high levels of tolerance, respect for cultural values, and compassion for the disadvantaged, indicates that in some way, Starfinder is supporting these immigrants through the assimilation process.

Immigrant Youth Experiences

More than 60 million people in the United States (which is approximately 22% of the total population) are foreign-born or have foreign-born parentage.¹¹ This increasing subset of the population has vastly different experiences than their American-born peers, for they are suspended in a unique milieu, between American and immigrant cultures. Even when looking at the assimilation experiences of immigrant youth in comparison to adult immigrants, the identified challenges and key experiences often differ. As expected, youth from different countries of origin face different challenges; nonetheless, immigrant youth often cite challenges associated with migration to a new country, discrimination, educational obstacles, difficulty with language acquisition, and feelings of exclusion, as the main barriers to assimilation.¹²

While existing literature can provide a general overview of what the assimilation process is like for immigrant youth, it is important to note that no two individuals will undergo the exact same process or share identical experiences, in part because the assimilation process is incredibly personal and intimate. In an attempt to better understand the assimilation process of immigrant youth participating in the Starfinder program, 7 interviews were conducted with youth of Benin, Haitian, Indian, Liberian, Nigerian, Ukrainian, and Venezuelan/Colombian heritage. Their responses (coupled with testimonials from other Starfinder participants) while illuminating, are not intended to be representative of all immigrant youth, or of all Starfinder participants for that matter.

Economic Opportunity

Having spent several days speaking with the 7 participants, each of them described how they migrated from their country of origin and how their families eventually settled in Philadelphia. One noticeable trend was that their parents chose to relocate the family based on the pursuit of better economic conditions. This response is not anomalous, for according to findings from a Yale University study, “The main reason for immigration has long been economic opportunity, the lure of better land or a better job.”¹³ In fact, this search for economic opportunity was also one of the reasons why the interviewed youth reported continuing to participate in Starfinder. One individual explained that, “there are so many opportunities here. Like now, I’m getting paid to teach little kids soccer” referring to the Senior Leaders Program, a unique program for high school students that incorporates work experience with leadership development. In his testimonial, another immigrant youth explained that:

“One of these opportunities that Starfinder has presented me with is a job working at summer camps in various sites throughout the city so the youth of Philadelphia can have a place to play soccer and have a safe place to have fun. It’s really tough for people like me to find jobs because employers don’t like to hire inexperienced workers. Since Starfinder has offered us these jobs we are able to gain experience and earn some hard-earned cash.”

The inclusion of an often cited area of concern for immigrants into Starfinder’s programming reflects how the organization continues to attract immigrant youth, without explicitly recruiting them. By leveraging the sport of soccer, Starfinder provides participants with the opportunity to gain work experience, which is an undoubtedly important part of the assimilation process.

Self-Identification:

As mentioned before, the contemporary definition of assimilation challenges the misrepresentation that the process is simply about ‘becoming white’. The varied responses from the interview participants, when asked how they self-identify, reflect not only the complexity of the assimilation process, but the changing demographics of the country. Not surprisingly, each participant initially paused, and either stated their country of origin or asked for further clarification on what the question meant. One exclaimed, “I’m Haitian, and proud!” while another nonchalantly replied that he is “Still from Benin...it doesn’t really matter to me.” Yet the confounded response by an Indian-born, naturalized citizen illustrates how difficult it can be for one to self-identify during the assimilation process. As he explained, “I am an American Indian... sometimes I get confused, what should I say? I’ve loved the US from when I was 5” later adding, “I love everything about the U.S.”

Despite the complex nature of the assimilation process, results from the 2012 survey indicate that “80% of respondents reported they liked the person they are, suggesting strong social and physical confidence.”¹⁴ What is unique about this case is that these immigrant youth, who differ on the basis of their nativity, not only maintain high levels of confidence through this challenging transitional phase, but they all embrace each other’s differences. As one youth expressed in his testimonial,

“The people who go to Starfinder are ethnically diverse. There are so many people that come from different countries and speak different languages. I myself am Polish. Many other participants in the Starfinder Foundation are from Colombia, Ghana, Liberia, Mexico, and many other countries. I can’t think of any other place in the region that so many different kinds of people can come together for a common cause. The Starfinder Foundation and its use of soccer as a tool to bring people together is responsible for this. All of these things show why the Starfinder Foundation is such a great friend to me....”

Why Starfinder:

Despite the various differences in their personal narratives, the common denominator was their shared love and passion for soccer and overall appreciation for the opportunities that Starfinder has provided them. Every participant I spoke with enthusiastically expressed how much they enjoy playing soccer, with some emphatically declaring that they will be professional soccer players someday. Soccer is a sport that can be practiced practically anywhere, for it requires relatively minimal equipment; yet in spite of this fact, those interviewed often mentioned the long commute they endure to get to the Starfinder facility.

Several participants described the arduous trip, explaining that the one-way commute takes “at least one hour, but that’s because I have to make 3 transfers.” Another participant explained that the commute is incredibly “annoying! It’s at least one hour here, one hour back! But once you’re here, you’re with your friends...and I leave with them, so you don’t notice the commute back as much.”

Although the commute time is incredibly long, each participant not only explained that “it’s worth it,” but that they would heartily recommend their friends to join the program, emphasizing that, “It’s been great. I think I’m really lucky to have found Starfinder!” While most organizations use program evaluation measures such as attendance and attrition rates, one potential measure that can better capture the impact that Starfinder has on these immigrant youth is a referral rate, for every interviewee described being referred to Starfinder by a friend. What is distinct about looking at referral rates is that, to some extent, it captures the complex social interactions between individuals. As one participant narrated, he initially heard about Starfinder from his two close friends, who are of Ukrainian and Colombian decent. Upon enrolling in the program, he enjoyed it so much that he then relayed the message to other friends, explaining, “I like it here, so I know they’ll enjoy it. I already brought five or six into the program!”

Conclusion

As a rapidly growing nation experiencing a transitional change in its demographic composition, the process of assimilation is one of increasing importance. Long gone are the days when assimilation meant ‘becoming white’. As evidenced by the responses from the 7 interviewed participants coupled with the various testimonials, the assimilation process is personal and inherently complex, often leaving individuals undergoing the process to question how they self-identify. Yet this complex process can be aided by organizations such as Starfinder Foundation, who provide immigrants with unique services and opportunities that help ease their transition.

It is only fitting to end this concept paper with the testimonial of a Starfinder participant, describing the role of Starfinder in the assimilation process. For the immigrant youth of Starfinder, assimilation does not mean ‘becoming white’ or “learning to identify yourself as American,” nor does it mean “learning about the civics and history of this nation.”¹⁵ For the immigrant youth of Starfinder, assimilation means recognizing the beauty in each individual and appreciating the differences. As one participant expressed in a testimonial:

“In the world we live in right now, wars have started because of differences yet Starfinder finds a way to acquire a common thing; soccer, to bring together the human race in a way that barely ever has been achieved. We then look past our differences and we see how similar we are, and this is Starfinder’s greatest deed, helping kids get past their differences and to see their likeness to one another through soccer. Uniting the community is what Starfinder does best.”

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