

Commentary

Merit and the Case for Immigration

Most of the high-achieving U.S. students to whom we award college scholarships have foreign-born parents.

By Phil Gramm and Robert Topel

Dec. 23, 2024 4:58 pm ET

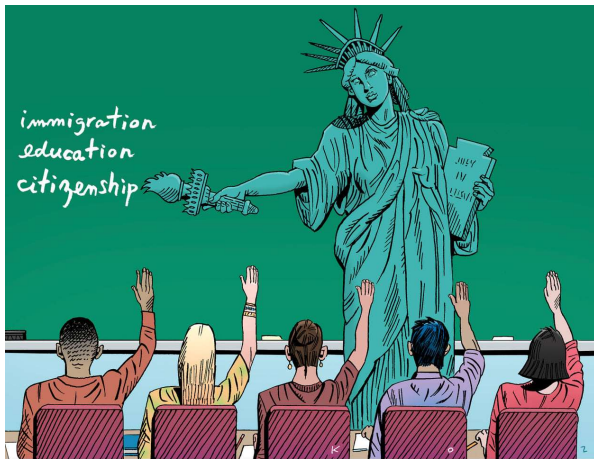


Illustration: Martin Kozlowski

In a country with widespread use of quotas, preferences and set-asides, we seldom see unadulterated merit, especially in academics. As board members of a foundation that awards scholarships based on merit and financial need, we have seen what merit looks like. The findings are important enough to share.

Finis Welch, our late friend and economics colleague at Texas A&M University and UCLA, grew up in a poor Texas family and was paralyzed from the waist down in an accident when he was 18. That setback fueled his determination to succeed. Finis became a prominent academic economist and made a fortune in statistical software, economic consulting and ranching. He left that fortune to award four-year college scholarships to promising students from Texas families of modest means. Students, in other words, like him.

The Finis Welch Foundation supports more than 40 students a year at Texas A&M and the University of Texas, with plans to expand to as many as 250 scholarships a year. Both universities provide the foundation with roughly 300 of their top applications from students seeking financial aid. Our scholarships cover tuition, room and board and provide services, such as mentoring and business contacts, that prosperous parents might give their children. The foundation offers instruction in everything from table manners and etiquette to career and life advice and has staff who are there when our scholars need help.

When awarding scholarships, the foundation ignores applicants' race and sex. We review high-school transcripts, but given the level of [grade inflation](#), for all practical purposes, our applicants have near-perfect grades and have taken many advanced-placement courses. So transcripts and grades are of limited use in choosing among candidates. The same is true for the obligatory college essay. Other factors are more informative and distinguishing, such as extracurricular activities and whether an applicant worked while in high school. All applicants have stellar recommendations, but some letters stand out. Relative performance on standardized tests is the key differentiator among this pool of high-achieving candidates. That's why the foundation requires all applicants to take the SAT or ACT. The average SAT score of last year's 43 scholarship recipients was 1450, which is at the 96th percentile, and the highest score was a perfect 1600.

Once we make our selections, we ask for more biographical information as part of our counseling support. When the process is complete each year, the most common characteristic among recipients is that both parents

were born in a foreign country. This was true of 62% of the recipients in 2024, about three times the share that would be expected if the students were drawn at random from the nation's schools. Another 9% had one foreign-born parent, while only 29% had both parents born in the U.S. Parents of this year's recipients came from China, Guatemala, India, Korea, Kuwait, Laos, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan and Vietnam. Not surprisingly in Texas, 20% of foreign-born parents were from Mexico.

These extraordinary numbers raise the question: Why did a majority of high-school seniors chosen on merit come from families with immigrant parents? Part of the reason is that foreign-born parents are on average poorer and more likely to meet the foundation's income requirement. But there's more to it. Based on [research from the Institute for Family Studies](#), immigrant households are more likely to have both natural parents in the household. Also, their children were [less than half as likely](#) to have recorded behavioral problems at school, and were much less likely to have ever been expelled.

But immigrant households also predominantly spoke a foreign language at home, were much more likely to live in poor areas or areas with high minority populations, and were less likely to own their own home. The overwhelming majority of Welch Foundation scholarship recipients attended public schools—often subpar ones—though they were more likely than other students in their neighborhoods to attend charter schools. But perhaps the most significant finding is that [91% of all immigrant parents](#) nationwide expected their children to graduate from college, and 59% expected them to pursue graduate or professional degrees.

Our conversations with winners confirm these high expectations. Immigrant parents know their children can advance through education.

These findings reinforce why America needs immigrants. Illegal immigration should be stopped because it is illegal, but that shouldn't taint our view of legal immigration. Immigrants bring new energy to America, and their drive to succeed has been a powerful force for American progress.

The story of America is the story of the immigrant. America can attract legal immigrants from all over the world based on the opportunity and freedom we offer. What Pericles said 2,500 years ago about Athens applies to America today: "Where the prize is highest, there, too, will you find the best and the bravest."

Preventing the best and bravest from coming to our shores is a recipe for national decline. Ambition and dreams are powerful. The Finis Welch scholarship recipient this year with a perfect 1600 SAT score and foreign-born parents was asked on the scholarship application about his goals. His response: "to cure cancer."

Mr. Gramm, a former chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, is a nonresident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Mr. Topel is vice chairman of the Welch Foundation and a professor emeritus of economics at the University of Chicago.