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BACHELOR'S AND BEYOND

In America, Nigerians' education pursuit is above rest

Whether driven by immigration or family, data show more earn degrees

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Nigerian David Olowokere, chairman of TSU's engineering technologies department, says the goal for his children is to do "as good as us — if not better."

ERIC KAYNE CHRONICLE

For Woodlands resident David Olowokere, one of Nigeria's sons, having a master's degree in engineering just wasn't enough for his people back home. So he got a doctorate.

His wife, Shalewa Olowokere, a civil engineer, didn't stop at a bachelor's, either. She went for

her master's.

The same obsession with education runs in the Udeh household in Sugar Land. Foluke Udeh and her husband, Nduka, both have master's degrees. Anything less, she reckons, would have amounted to failure.

"If you see an average Nigerian family, everybody has a college degree these days," said Udeh, 32, a physical therapist at Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center. "But a post-graduate degree, that's like pride for the family."

Nigerian immigrants have the highest levels of education in this city and the nation, surpassing whites and Asians, according to Census data bolstered by an analysis of 13 annual Houston-area surveys conducted by Rice University.

Although they make up a tiny portion of the U.S. population, a whopping 17 percent of all Nigerians in this country held master's degrees while 4 percent had a doctorate, according to the 2006 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. In addition, 37 percent had bachelor's degrees.

In comparison

To put those numbers in perspective, 8 percent of the white population in the U.S. had master's degrees, according to the Census survey. And 1 percent held doctorates. About 19 percent of white residents had bachelor's degrees. Asians come closer to the Nigerians with 12 percent holding master's degrees and 3 percent having doctorates.

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The Nigerian numbers are "strikingly high," said Roderick Harrison, demographer at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington, D.C., think tank that specializes in researching black issues. "There is no doubt that these are highly educated professionals who are probably working in the petrochemical, medical and business sectors in Houston."

Harrison analyzed the census data for the Houston Chronicle.

Stephen Klineberg, a sociologist at Rice University who conducts the annual Houston Area Survey, suspects the percentage of Nigerian immigrants with post-graduate degrees is higher than Census data shows.

Of all the Nigerian immigrants he reached in his random phone surveys 1994 through 2007 — 45 households total — Klineberg said 40 percent of the Nigerians said they had post-graduate degrees.

"These are higher levels of educational attainment than were found in any other ... community," Klineberg said.

There are more than 12,000 Nigerians in Houston, according to the latest Census data, a figure sociologists and Nigerian community leaders say is a gross undercount. They believe the number to be closer to 100,000.

Staying in school

The reasons Nigerians have more post-graduate degrees than any other racial or ethnic group are

largely due to Nigerian society's emphasis on mandatory and free education. Once immigrating to this country, practical matters of immigration laws get in the way.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 made it easier for Africans to enter the U.S., but mostly as students or highly skilled professionals — not through family sponsorships, Klineberg said.

So many Africans pursue higher levels of education as an unintended consequence of navigating the tricky minefield of immigration, said Amadu Jacky Kaba, an associate professor at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., who has done research on African immigrants in the U.S.

"In a way, it's a Catch-22 — because of immigration laws you are forced to remain in school, but then the funny thing is you end up getting your doctorate at the age of 29," Kaba said. "If you stay in school, immigration will leave you alone."

Although Kaba, who teaches Africana Studies, is not from Nigeria (he is Liberian), he said he, too, found himself pursuing a master's and then a doctorate to remain in this country legally.

But not all Africans have to go this route. Some say their motivation is driven by their desire to overcome being a double minority: black and African.

Take Oluyinka Olutoye, 41, associate professor of pediatric surgery at Baylor College of

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Medicine. He came to this country already as a medical doctor but decided to pursue his doctorate in anatomy to help set himself apart.

"Being black, you are already at a disadvantage," said Olutoye, whose wife, Toyin Olutoye, is an anesthesiologist at Baylor. "You really need to excel far above if you want to be considered for anything in this country."

Family expectations

All this talk of education creates high expectations for children of Nigerian immigrants. The eldest child of David Olowokere, chairman of the engineering technologies department at Texas Southern University, for example, is already working on her master's degree in public health in Atlanta; the middle child is pursuing a bachelor's in pre-medicine. His youngest, a son, attends The Woodlands High School. He already has aspirations to go into engineering, just like his parents, Olowokere beams.

"The goal is for them to do as good as us — if not better," he said.

Oluyinka Olutoye put it another way.

"The typical saying in a Nigerian household is that the best inheritance that a parent can give you is not jewelry or cash or material things, it is a good education," he said. "It is expected."

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