



Educator Brief

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IMMIGRATION INITIATIVE

Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Undocumented Students & Those in Mixed-Status Families in Higher Education

By Carolina Valdivia & Josefina Espino, University of California, Irvine

There are approximately 408,000 undocumented college students in the United States.¹ This includes those who have access to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides eligible undocumented young adults with temporary relief from deportation and work authorization.² It also includes the new generation of undocumented high school graduates who do not qualify for DACA given the ongoing and pending litigation surrounding the program. There are also college students who were born in the U.S. to parents who are undocumented and as such identify as individuals from mixed-status families (that is, a family where at least one member is undocumented).



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Undocumented and mixed-status students encounter a unique set of challenges when it comes to their pursuit of higher education. There is the fear and stigma that are associated with being undocumented (or having a loved one who is undocumented), which can prevent students from securing support and resources. Students are also contending with an increasingly hostile enforcement landscape and changing state-level policies that shape their ability to enroll in public colleges and universities, secure in-state tuition rates, or obtain state financial aid. Moreover, while DACA recipients can access work permits, driver's licenses, and certain educational opportunities,³ current policies block new applicants from obtaining these crucial protections. DACAmented, undocumented and mixed-status college students face interconnected challenges as they navigate access to fundamental needs, including securing food and housing as well as obtaining transportation, legal services, and other essential resources.

College personnel—from admissions officers to counselors and administrators—occupy a crucial position in supporting these students' educational journeys. Through direct interaction during admissions, financial aid processes, and counseling sessions, these professionals can create safe spaces for open dialogue, connect students with trustworthy resources, and provide essential guidance through sensitive immigration-related matters. Their role extends beyond administrative support to offering crucial information and encouragement throughout students' academic careers.

This Ed Brief examines how undoc-

DEFINITIONS

Undocumented: When an individual does not have legal documentation to live in the United States.

Mixed-Status Family: A unit where at least one member identifies as undocumented while another has some type of legal protection like a green card or U.S. citizenship. The most common example is U.S.-born students whose parents are undocumented.

Immigrant: An individual who physically resides in a country other than the one where they were born. Individuals' reasons for immigrating to a new country vary. Reasons include the need to escape threats of violence or civil unrest, as well as the need to search for better economic, educational, or medical opportunities.

DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals): A federal program first announced by the Obama administration in 2012. The Trump administration sought to terminate the program in 2017. DACA has remained in limbo ever since and its future is uncertain pending court litigation.

Basic or Essential Needs: Refers to the set of needs that are essential for college students to thrive and succeed in their higher education pursuits. This includes issues around food, housing, transportation, and health care services. For undocumented and mixed-status students, such needs also entail adequate access to legal services, professional and career development opportunities, and post-college support, as well as reliable access to means of communication.⁴

Out-of-state tuition: A type of tuition that tends to be more expensive than "in-state" tuition and is based on how the state defines who is considered a resident of the state for tuition purposes. To qualify for in-state tuition rates, students typically have to live in the state for a certain period before enrollment and must meet other eligibility criteria.

ocumented and mixed-status college students navigate access to essential resources—from housing and food security to transportation and legal services. By providing practical insights and strategies, we aim to equip college personnel nationwide with the knowledge and tools needed to enhance these students' academic success and overall well-being. Our goal is to foster an educational environment where all students, regardless of immigration status, can pursue their academic aspirations with dignity and support.

Recognizing Resiliencies Among Undocumented College Students & Those in Mixed-Status Families

The very presence of undocumented and mixed-status students in higher education—from community colleges, to state colleges and universities, to private

Ivy League schools and within the ranks of undergraduate, graduate programs, and professional programs—represents a testament to their resilience and resourcefulness.⁵ Despite navigating complex institutional barriers, financial hardships, and the threat of deportation to themselves and their loved ones, this segment of students demonstrates remarkable determination in pursuing their educational dreams.

Their ability to persist while simultaneously managing immigration-related anxieties, family responsibilities, and academic demands showcases exceptional psychological strength and adaptability.⁶ Research has shown that social support from family and friends, connection with trusted educators, and participation in social activism are primary determinants of resiliency

for these students.⁷ By drawing upon trusted social supports they may forge meaningful connections that can help counteract feelings of isolation while fostering collective resilience through shared experiences and mutual support.⁸ This capacity to persist despite significant structural barriers while maintaining academic excellence and contributing to their communities exemplifies “transformative resilience”⁹ – the ability to not merely survive challenges but to transform them into sources of strength and growth for not just themselves, but for their families, their communities, and the society in which they have spent much of their childhood.

Challenges to Undocumented College Students

Fear of Disclosure. Undocumented college students often conceal their immigration status from others, including school personnel and peers, for fear that disclosure may result in being reported to immigration authorities.¹⁰ Yet students often have immigration-specific questions during the process of applying for college, a scholarship, or an internship.¹¹ Under these circumstances, undocumented college students consider various factors as they decide whether to reveal or conceal their immigration status. If they conceal their status, this may prevent them from securing support and resources that may otherwise be available.¹²

Concerns Amid Heightened Enforcement. Recent years have marked a sharp rise in the number of deportations.¹³ This has ripple effects on entire communities and families who fear that a loved one may be arrested and subsequently deported.¹⁴ Young adults in particular are concerned about their parents’ safety during their daily commutes to work or while at work.¹⁵ Under the threat of deportation, undocumented college students experience a heightened state of



alertness and anxiety.¹⁶ Further, recent political threats of mass deportations have created uncertainty among campus leaders and support staff on how best to balance risks and manage supports for vulnerable students.¹⁷

Barriers to Programs and Opportunities.

Undocumented college students are prohibited from receiving federal financial aid and legally working. For undocumented college students, where they physically reside matters greatly. This is because states have taken different actions in either expanding or restricting access to opportunities for undocumented immigrants. While some states provide access to in-state tuition rates or state financial aid for undocumented college students, many often struggle to afford the rising costs of tuition and must rely on under-the-table work or financial support from their families.^{18, 19}

In California, for example, undocumented students may be eligible for in-state tuition (AB 540), state financial aid (AB 130 & 131), and a driver’s license (AB 60). California has also expanded access to health insurance coverage and professional licenses for undocumented immigrants. In sharp contrast, undocumented students in South Carolina are prohibited from enrolling in the state’s public colleges and universities, including community colleges.²⁰ Ultimately, undocumented

college students face an increasingly hostile landscape that is intimately shaped by changes in policy and practices at the institutional, local, state, and federal levels.

Rising Anti-Immigrant Sentiment & Policies.

Undocumented college students are also contending with an increasingly hostile landscape of anti-immigrant sentiment and enforcement. This is especially the case following the 2024 U.S. presidential election results, as heightened immigration enforcement and deportation policies have become central features of national political discourse and proposed federal initiatives. Such a climate permeates classroom walls and has detrimental impacts on students’ ability to attend school, concentrate, and form trustworthy relationships.²¹

Challenges to Mixed-Status Students

U.S.-born citizen students, or green card holders, whose parents are undocumented also encounter challenges stemming from their parents’ immigration status. They experience fear and anxiety over the possibility of a parent’s arrest.²² Similar to their undocumented peers, students in mixed-status families are also contending with heightened enforcement and growing anti-immigrant sentiment. While their individual legal status provides them



access to a wide range of opportunities, such as FAFSA and the ability to work, students in mixed-status families often help their parents navigate legal and social systems in a search for resources and are subsequently exposed to a unique set of anxieties, fears, and uncertainties.

Negotiating a Sense of Privilege & Guilt.

Students in mixed-status families often grapple with a sense of privilege and guilt.²³ This is in large part because their legal status confers them a set of rights and privileges that their undocumented relatives are deprived of. Such circumstances compel young adults to adopt a wide range of responsibilities to help their families, emotionally and financially.²⁴

Confusion Surrounding Public Charge Rule.

There is also great confusion around the public charge rule implemented in late-2022.²⁵ These circumstances make it difficult for students in mixed-status families to identify which resources they (and their families) may be eligible for versus those that may hurt their options for immigration relief in the future. Such confusion also prevents access to

resources that are otherwise available to immigrant families due to the fear that is associated with being excluded from a potential pathway to citizenship for utilizing such services.²⁶

Fear of Outing Parents Through Forms or The Process of Seeking Services.

Relatedly, while U.S. citizens whose parents are undocumented qualify for opportunities and programs such as FAFSA and CalFresh, among others, students may hesitate to apply for fear of outing their parents in the process. This is because federal and state-level programs often inquire about the names, addresses, and incomes of the individual applying and their immediate family members. Consequently, students in mixed-status families may opt for foregoing services and programs to protect their parents from possible detection.

Growing Basic Needs Insecurity Among Low-Income and First-Generation Students

The general college student population is experiencing increasing difficulty meeting basic needs such as securing adequate food, housing, and mental health support.²⁷ One study, for

example, found that two in three community college students are “food insecure” (that is, they had limited or unstable access to adequate food).²⁸

Undocumented students and those from mixed-status families are at a particular disadvantage in these domains. First, undocumented students have trouble accessing support and resources to meet their basic needs because there are often restrictions based on immigration status. This includes programs such as CalFresh, SSI, TANF, and many others. Second, students are contending with the fear and uncertainty surrounding the public charge rule. Third, and relatedly, students must grapple with concerns about their safety and privacy when inquiring about services and resources. Lastly, undocumented and mixed-status students are grappling with multiple needs in ways that require us to expand our current definition of basic needs,²⁹ which is generally constrained to issues of food, housing, and more recently, mental health.

Financial Barriers & Employment

Restrictions. Given the limitations and uncertainties surrounding DACA, many of today’s undocumented college students do not have access to work authorization. This poses a significant challenge to their ability to secure employment to cover their housing, transportation, food, and medical needs. Those who were able to benefit from DACA are also contending with difficulty renewing their DACA permits every two years, lapses in their DACA protections because of processing delays at USCIS, as well as the possibility that the program may end soon.

Mental Health and Legal Support.

Relatedly, undocumented college students and those in mixed-status families are navigating growing concerns, anxieties, and fears over the current political climate, which is characterized by anti-immigrant sentiment, heightened enforcement, and rapidly changing immigration-related policies and practices. To address these



challenges, institutions must provide accessible, culturally responsive mental health services with counselors who understand immigration-related trauma, peer support groups, and confidential spaces where students can safely process their experiences and develop coping strategies. To this end, many students are also in need of legal advice, information about their rights, and possible options for relief that may be available to them or their families.

Post-College Support. Given that many of today's undocumented college students do not have access to the protections otherwise available under DACA, they are also confronted with a profound sense of uncertainty and instability. Many of them are contemplating multiple plans (working under the table, staying longer in school, pursuing graduate school, or leaving the country), often with limited support and resources.

Recommendations for Supporting Undocumented & Mixed-Status College Students

There are multiple ways that school personnel can support students from undocumented and mixed-status families. Resources and support are especially critical during today's political climate characterized by increasing anti-immigrant sentiment and heightened enforcement. In addition to serving as mentors and navigators, educators, counselors, and administrators can create welcoming and supportive learning environments for college students.

Increase Staff and Faculty Training and Awareness About the Experiences of Undocumented Students, and Those in Mixed-Status Families. Faculty, staff, and administrators play a vital role in creating a supportive environment for students, yet many of these college personnel lack awareness of the unique challenges faced by undocumented and mixed-status students. Regular training sessions such as “UndocuAlly” training should be developed to provide educational materials about the complexities of immigration status. Training should cover an overview of the undocumented and immigration-impacted student experience, the importance of using inclusive language, and discussion about the immigration laws and practices that impact higher education such as in-state tuition and the notion of safe spaces.

Family & Social Support Needs. Support groups offer critical benefits for undocumented and mixed-status students. Such spaces, for example, can help foster a sense of safety and belonging among students, which is helpful to counteract feelings of isolation and fear that impact their well-being. In an environment where students feel safe from being judged or discriminated against, they are also more likely to discuss their mental health challenges, such as anxiety related to their immigration status or fear of deportation. Support groups also provide opportunities for students to connect with peers who share similar experiences, fostering resilience through collective problem-solving and emotional support. This mutual understanding and encouragement can help students build healthy coping mechanisms for managing stressors unique to their status, such as financial strain or fear of family separation. These safe spaces—carefully secured from potential disruption or surveillance by hostile actors—also should offer structured access to resources to help students navigate challenges impeding their

educational progress.

Develop Institutional Policies and Programs. Institutions of higher education can better support undocumented students by establishing policies and programs that aim to address their needs. Emergency grants, for example, can help students facing sudden financial crises, such as a family member's unexpected legal expenses or job loss. These efforts can reduce the risk of housing and food insecurity. Implementing services and programming that provide mental health counseling and physical health services at low or no cost, regardless of immigration status, can also help ensure that students obtain prompt and adequate support. This can include, for example, drop-in counseling sessions and group therapy sessions. Culturally competent counseling services that address specific traumas undocumented and mixed-status students may face, such as fear of deportation and family separation, can also be instrumental. Additionally, consider developing mentorship programs that pair undocumented students with faculty or staff who understand their struggles and can provide guidance on navigating campus life and career planning.

Create Alternative Food and Housing Programs. Federal and state programs such as CalFresh in California or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are inaccessible to undocumented individuals. Yet institutions can create alternative pathways to address food and housing insecurity among undocumented students. For instance, by partnering with local nonprofits or community programs, universities can offer meal vouchers for on-campus or local restaurants or nearby grocery stores. This would provide a critical safety net for students when in need. Universities could also establish food banks or pantries available to all students, food-sharing initiatives, or host community meals to ensure students have access to regular, nutritious food. These initiatives are invaluable for students who otherwise may be skipping meals due to financial hardship. Additionally, by working with the campus

housing department, universities can implement subsidized and temporary housing options for students with unreliable housing or who are facing homelessness.

Building Partnerships with Community Partners and Businesses. These partnerships could include internships or job training programs that offer stipends or academic credit. Such opportunities can provide students with valuable experience without requiring employment authorization. Additionally, collaborating with local legal aid services, mental health clinics, and housing support organizations can ensure students have access to specialized resources outside of the university. For example, partnerships with mental health providers experienced in trauma support for undocumented communities could allow for confidential, culturally-sensitive care at a reduced cost.

Develop or Collect Information About Resources Geared Towards Addressing Students' Legal Needs and Questions. In a climate where policies are constantly and rapidly changing, as well as where enforcement is expanding and intensifying, it is important to equip students with the tools necessary to prepare in the event of an encounter with a police or immigration officer. To this end, consider developing a toolkit for students on how to handle family immigration-related emergencies such as a loved one's arrest or deportation. This can also include providing "Know Your Rights" workshops or resources to educate students and staff on interacting with authorities. It can also be helpful to develop a protocol for addressing potential ICE activity on or near campus to ensure that students can access timely updates and support.



RESOURCES

My Undocumented Life: This online platform provides up-to-date information and resources for undocumented students and their families. This includes scholarship opportunities that are open to undocumented students, strategies for navigating college and grad school while undocumented, information on how to apply for DACA, personal stories of growing up undocumented, and more.

Immigrant Legal Resource Center: This organization provides a wide range of resources to immigrants, community organizations, and legal service providers. This includes Know Your Rights (KYR) information such as "Red Cards," family emergency preparedness plans, a list of rapid response networks in California, and more. These KYR resources are geared towards equipping immigrants with helpful tools and information in the event of an encounter with law enforcement or immigration.

Immigrants Rising: This organization offers an array of programs and services that holistically address the needs of undocumented young people through direct support, leadership and career development, community outreach and education, creative expression, and advocacy. Immigrants Rising has a number of guides, including: "DACA Guide," "Got DACA? Now What?," scholarship lists, educator guides, and more.

Informed Immigrant: The mission of this organization is to provide all undocumented immigrants with knowledge and resources to be prepared in an unpredictable political and enforcement environment. It has a database based on location offered in both Spanish and English.

National Immigration Law Center: This organization is dedicated to defending and advancing the rights of low-income immigrants. On its website, NILC features several immigration-related reports and resources, including information on in-state tuition benefits and state financial aid for undocumented students.

New York State Youth Leadership Council: This organization is based out of New York and provides both in-person and online resources. In New York, NYSYLC partakes in grassroots organizing and training, as well as organizes healing circles and other events that help foster a sense of community among undocumented youth. On their website, they also feature resources related to DACA, college access, and Know Your Rights.

Pre-Health Dreamers: This organization shares information on career pathways for pre-health undocumented students as well as advocates for more progressive institutional and governmental policies for undocumented students.

United We Dream: This nonprofit organization is dedicated to advocating for the rights of undocumented immigrant youth and their families. Their work includes fostering a network of immigrant youth, as well as providing DACA-related information and resources. United We Dream also partakes in advocacy efforts, including organizing rallies, creating petitions, and raising awareness through training, and other events.

TO LEARN MORE

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Additional Credits

Editor: **Carola Suárez-Orozco**

Line Editor: **Kit von Campe**

Layout Designer: **Andrena Mason**

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The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

