



Defined By Limitations

The American Dream is known worldwide: come to the United States from abroad, and through hard work and perseverance, achieve your dreams and realize success. Part of the American Dream is an implicit message that all students are special and can achieve whatever they set their minds to. We tell our students, “Work hard and get to college. Put the time in now, and you will be rewarded later.” College counselors tell every student, regardless of test scores or transcripts, “There is a school out there that is perfect for you.” Every student hears this message during his/her time in high school, and every student believes it to be true. Unfortunately, it is not true for all of our students. Undocumented students will not be rewarded later. There are few schools that are perfect for them. They do not have the same opportunities as other students. Hard work and perseverance are not enough.

We’ve known “Xavier” since his first year at our college preparatory school. He runs cross country, is a Big Brother to entering freshmen and is active in our theatre program. His parents don’t speak very much English but are very supportive of Xavier and want a better life for him. He studies hard, takes his classes seriously and is a leader in the school community.

As we begin to talk about college options with our juniors, we notice that Xavier is not as engaged as his fellow students. He comes to the office after school one day with his mother to talk with one of us. She whispers a question, “Xavier does not have any ‘papers’—will he be able to go to college?”

They have little knowledge of the challenges that await them.

Undocumented students are a population defined by limitations. Their lack of legal residency and any supporting paperwork (e.g., Social Security number, government issued identification) renders them essentially invisible to the American and state governments. They cannot legally work. In many states, they cannot legally drive. After the age of 18, they cannot travel on airplanes without government issued identification. With a life defined by limitations, what may appear to be a “typical” adolescence is anything but—undocumented students reside in two parallel worlds: one which requires them to keep secrets about family issues such

as legal residency and sources of income; and another which, on a daily basis, asks them to believe in the power of education to change their circumstances.

Xavier spends the first few weeks of his senior year crafting his personal statement. He writes about feeling safe at school and how his studies are an escape from his problems. He writes about his constant feelings of dread—looking over his shoulder to make sure he does not attract undue attention from the police or other law enforcement. Every day lived with the understanding that one bad move could get him deported (and his family along with him). In Xavier’s case he was brought to the United States when he was less than a year old. Deported “back” to his country?

The country he has not visited or lived in?
The country of which he has no memory?

Undocumented students fit the profile of the first-generation student as well as the low-income student. They have an underdeveloped sense of postsecondary education—they know that a college degree will help them get a “good job,” but if pressed to define a ‘good job,’ struggle with the answer. Their parents are fervent believers in the importance of a college degree, but look to the high school to define what that means and how their child can get there. Parents are open about their lack of resources—both financial and social—to support their child’s college education.

The college guidance counselors discuss Xavier’s situation. “What can we do?” is the question everyone asks. The reality is that his college options, like his options in living in our affluent area, are severely limited by his citizenship status. A few options are discussed: attend a public California college or university and pay in state tuition. Hope for enough merit-based aid at a private college. Find a donor to sponsor him, a donor who understands that Pell Grants, Cal Grants and federal loans are not available to this young man.

More limitations surface: he cannot get a driver’s license. He cannot fly home for holidays or summer break. He will not be able to choose his college based upon his accomplishments and dreams. He will not be able to use the financial aid system enjoyed by his classmates to help him pay for his education. Another

dilemma: once he graduates from college, what then? Who will employ him without a Social Security number?

College counselors at public, private and charter schools along with college admission officers across the country are already struggling with the reality of undocumented students. It is our challenge, and our responsibility, to offer realistic college options. Currently undocumented students are eligible to pay in-state tuition in 10 states across the United States: California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin. Some private colleges and universities have scholarship funds available for undocumented students, but there is usually more demand than funds available. With precious few institutional dollars, they reason, “we can fund one student totally, or provide three or four students

partial funds to supplement federal and state grants and loans.” Private scholarships that do not require a Social Security number are available, and while a student may spend a lot of time submitting numerous applications, this effort may be time well-spent.

As college counselors we realize that until laws change, this is our reality. These are good students who are kind, generous, hard working and bright. Any of them have the potential to be great leaders but more importantly good friends and neighbors in our community. Our reality and our responsibility is to work together with them to arrive at the best situation possible, even if it means revising students’ dreams and constructing educational work-arounds with the help of colleges and donors if possible. Xavier and others like him depend on us, and deserve a better life in our land of dreams.



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Five Secrets to Success for Undocumented Students

by **Katharine Gin** (biography on page 20)

1. Get comfortable asking for help. You can’t do this alone.
2. Find older students who can be role models and mentors. They may just be a few years older than you!
3. Form strong relationships with teachers and mentors with whom you can speak honestly and openly about your challenges.
4. Be creative. Be entrepreneurial. Don’t take no for an answer.
5. Believe in yourself. Know that you have value to your family, your community, your classmates, and your country.

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