By Aliza Gilbert

Quest for Education

It never fails that every time I give the presentation *Undocumented Students and Their Quest for Higher Education* colleagues say they are not coming to hear me because, while they are sure my presentation will be wonderful, they have no undocumented students in their school. Skip ahead a few months and invariably one or more of them will call and sheepishly leave a message which starts with, "I have an undocumented student and I don't know what to do." Counseling professionals who work regularly with this population know that these students now exist in almost all of our high schools but many of them fly under the radar. Some hide out of fear and others from embarrassment. This is something that must change. If we are to help undocumented students navigate the complex process of researching and applying to college we must reach out to them and let them know that not only is college an option but that there are individuals who can help guide them through the process.

What can high schools and community-based organizations do?

Improve identification and outreach.

Counselors often trip over the first question: how does one know whether a student is undocumented? When I began working with these kids 10 years ago I began to notice some patterns. Many were smart kids with poor grades and bad attitudes about school. Others were students with great grades who never engaged in the college process. Couple either one of these descriptions with a student without a Social Security number and a birth place outside of the US and you have a potential undocumented student. Many students will open up when a counselor reaches out to them one-on-one. It might take a few years for students to develop trust in their counselor (remember these are kids who have spent most of their life hiding their status) but it will happen. Other students are also a wonderful resource. Occasionally, I have students who will not come forward but I have learned that if I gently ask other undocumented students who else should be on my radar, I end up with some additional names. Lastly, teachers and social workers should also be included on your target list. At my school they know the scoop on a student long before I do. Most are very protective of their students' privacy but if they know you can help and are to be trusted, the beans will spill.

Change the language used in presentations.

Even with the best outreach, you will still miss students. And, because I believe that we have a responsibility to help all students in our communities, not just those within our school, when I talk about who is eligible to attend college I use the words citizen, permanent resident and undocumented student. It has become part of my regular vernacular. Not only does it let any undocumented student in my presentation know that I am aware of their existence but even if every student in my audience is a citizen or permanent resident, I can pretty much guarantee that at least one of them knows someone who is not. The undocumented community is close knit and word travels fast. Sometimes, what travels is incorrect and that is why we must make sure that we are sharing the right message. We have to dispel the myth that undocumented students cannot attend college.

Get to the freshmen early.

Too often undocumented students think that they cannot attend college and therefore see little value in a high school education. As a result, their attendance and, subsequently, their academic performance are sometimes poor. Because undocumented students are not eligible for federal and state aid (unless they are lucky enough to live in one of the few states that makes aid available to them) merit scholarships are crucial. However, it is difficult to improve upon a poor grade point average after two or three years in high school. Each year I meet with a number of juniors who tell me they just learned they could attend college (clearly we are not doing enough outreach) and they want to know about scholarships. It is heartbreaking to tell these students that their low GPA makes them ineligible for almost all scholarships. When talking to freshmen about the importance of GPA in college admission and how GPA is calculated, one should be sure to specifically include a reference to undocumented students. You might be surprised who takes notice.

Inform students and parents about tuition costs and payment options.

Many parents are completely unaware of not only the varying costs of college but also how tuition can be paid. We need to spend time each fall talking with all families about the costs of attending college part time as well as the tuition differences at community college, a state university, as well as a private university. Conversations about payment also need to include payment options. Parents often do not know that the tuition bill for the year does not need to be paid on the first day of school, nor do most know of the payment plan option that many schools are now offering. Most

families cannot afford to pay thousands of dollars each August but many of them can afford a few hundred each month.

Affirm that an education is worthwhile.

I encountered my first undocumented student when I was working on the admission side and we admitted and partially funded a student from the high school where I now work. Even though he received a generous financial aid package the family was required to pay what for them was an incredibly large sum of money. I struggled with whether we were doing what was in the best interest of the student. Would he spend four years at college, graduate and then be unable to work? The answer then was maybe. The answer is still maybe, but I no longer wrestle with this. I have seen undocumented students go on to open their own businesses, take jobs abroad and some times even return to their country of birth. I have seen others alter their status through employment or marriage. Most, however, are still not documented and many are not employed in their field of study. However, I believe the value of an education extends far beyond simply getting a job. An education makes for a richer life by fostering a greater understanding of the world and helps one become a global citizen. Many undocumented college graduates will return to their communities as role models, inspiring others to pursue an education. To quote the United Negro College Fund, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

What can colleges do?

Revise the application for admission.

Make providing a Social Security number optional (a number of colleges have begun doing this already) and create an option under citizenship that says, non-citizen or other. Too many students give up on applications when they see questions they cannot answer. Not only will this help eliminate that but it also subtly tells undocumented students that they are welcome at your institution. Make sure that students can submit an online application if they leave the request for Social Security number blank, or if they use zeros. Too often they will complete an online application only to find that it cannot be submitted without a valid Social Security number or a checked box describing their citizenship status.

Educate admission staff.

Many admission professionals are misinformed regarding their institution's admission policies for undocumented students. Most incorrectly assume that they cannot admit undocumented students. No federal law prohibits colleges from admitting undocumented students. There are state laws and institutional policies but no federal laws. Make sure that your admission staff knows the policies of your institution in regard to both admission and funding. It takes just one person to crush the dreams that others have worked so hard to nurture. Ideally, each admission office should have at least one person who is knowledgeable about the special circumstances of these students and that individual would be the contact person for students and counselors.

Provide merit scholarships and privately funded institutional aid.

Many institutions offer merit scholarships and grant aid to international students but not to undocumented students. I beg colleges to rethink this policy. Many of these students are academic rock stars and leaders both within their school and community. They can and will contribute to a college campus. Rethink your financial aid policies if undocumented students are required to complete a paper FAFSA. We know that these students cannot submit a FAFSA and completing a paper version understandably makes them nervous. In addition, a majority of the questions on the FAFSA are not relevant. Think about creating a simpler institutional form that can be used to determine aid eligibility.

Make sure that your admission staff knows the policies of your institution in regard to both admission and funding. It takes just one person to crush the dreams that others have worked so hard to nurture. Ideally, each admission office should have at least one person who is knowledgeable about the special circumstances of these students and that individual would be the contact person for students and counselors.

ALIZA GILBERT is a college counselor at Highland Park High School (IL) with more than 15 years of experience in admission and college counseling. She earned her undergraduate degree in education from the University of Illinois and a master's degree in college student personnel and school counseling certification from Loyola University Chicago (IL). Gilbert is currently pursuing her doctorate in higher education at Loyola University Chicago. She has been a long time advocate in Illinois for undocumented students and their quest for higher education.