

Higher Education Access for Undocumented Students:

Recommendations for Counseling Professionals



Abstract

My research shows that college-eligible undocumented students exhibit high levels of academic achievement, civic engagement and resilience. Many overcome academic and socio-emotional barriers through social and moral support from family, peers, school agents and academic programs. As a result of the state residency tuition eligibility across the 10 states where most undocumented students reside, more than ever, community colleges and public universities are serving an important role in educating low-income, undocumented students. This article provides several research-informed suggestions for counseling professionals on how to best support higher education access for undocumented students.

Introduction

During the last two decades, the United States has undergone a significant demographic transformation due to immigration. Whereas in 1990 the foreign born population was less than 20 million, by 2007, it had nearly doubled to 38 million. In school districts across the nation, immigrant children represent 20 percent of the student population—a figure expected to increase to 30 percent by 2015 (Fix & Passel 2003).

Due to failed immigration policies as well as economic push and pull factors, among the immigrant population are 12 million undocumented persons. Among these are approximately 3.2 million youths under 24 years of age who were brought to the US by their parents, often before schooling age (Passel 2006). Before 1982, various school districts across the country tried to bar undocumented children from attending public schools.

Education access for undocumented students came as a result of the 1982 Supreme Court case of *Plyer v. Doe*. The Court ruled that undocumented children must be provided access to a public education, indicating that denying education to children who cannot affect their own status would impose a lifetime hardship. Presently, however, court-mandated equal access to education ends every year for approximately 65,000 undocumented students when they graduate from high school (Fix & Passel 2003). After extensive public educational investment, higher education becomes an elusive dream for these students with only about 10 percent of high school graduates enrolling in college (Fortuny, Capps, Passel 2007).

Despite the efforts of immigration reform proponents, and the introduction of the DREAM Act in Congress in 2001, the legal status of undocumented students remains uncertain. If



passed, the DREAM Act would provide a path to legalization and higher education access to undocumented high school graduates. As of 2009, however, the DREAM Act has not been passed into law, and undocumented students remain in limbo. Also beginning in 2001, Texas, followed by California, Utah, New York, Washington, Illinois, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Wisconsin took matters into their own hands by passing legislation that allows undocumented students to be eligible for in-state tuition rates. Despite lowering the barriers to higher education access, however, college graduates are still not able to work due to their undocumented status. The process set in motion through the 1982 federal ruling calling for a national guarantee of basic education to all students regardless of immigration status continues to fuel debates on state policies around postsecondary admission, tuition and financial aid for undocumented students. As a generation of undocumented students has come of age, graduating from high school, they are seeking the next level of opportunity.

My research on college-eligible undocumented students indicates that they exhibit academic achievement, leadership participation and civic engagement patterns that are often above that of their US-citizen counterparts (Perez 2009, Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, Cortes 2009a, Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, Cortes 2009b). More than 90 percent report volunteering and 95 percent participated in extracurricular activities. In those activities, 78 percent held a leadership position such as club president. Undocumented students also exhibit various aspects of psychological resilience, perseverance and optimism. For example, while students had responsibilities at home such as taking care of younger siblings,

worked various jobs an average of 13 hours per week during high school, 30 hours per week during college, and participated in extracurricular and volunteer activities at very high levels, they still earned high grades in their academically demanding courses. However, despite high levels of achievement, community service, leadership experience, and a deep sense of commitment to American society, they remain without legal status, are not considered American and thus are not eligible for any type of assistance to attend college even though more than 90 percent of the students surveyed aspire to obtain a master's degree or higher. If these qualifications do not warrant access to higher education and legal status, what more can they do?

This issue is examined in-depth in *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream* (Perez 2009). This book is a compilation of case studies of undocumented high school, community college, university and college graduate students who are valedictorians, honors students, and other exceptional student leaders who reflect on their hardships, accomplishments, dreams, and ambitions. For most, the US is the only country they know. They have grown up "American," their dominant language is English, yet they face major obstacles in their pursuit of higher education even with their remarkable academic qualifications. In spite of these challenges, the students exhibit the same type of tenacious optimism, drive and perseverance that fueled their parents' desire to pursue a better future in the US.

The Supreme Court mandates that undocumented children be accepted as students, but given immigration policy they are not accepted as citizens. The case studies in the book suggest that the lack of access to citizenship and higher education for undocumented students represents an ongoing loss of intellectual and civic talent to American society. Now more than ever, college counseling professionals need to familiarize themselves with the struggles of this emerging student population, especially given their growing numbers at community colleges and public universities due to various in-state tuition eligibility laws.

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should consider when serving undocumented students. For example, are there adequate resources in place to facilitate their enrollment? Will college personnel be sensitive and adept in working with this population? Colleges must pay close attention to the challenges of undocumented students in order to develop efficient strategies to facilitate their college experience (Dozier 1995). Based on insights from my research, I have developed the following recommendations for counseling professionals:

Assistance Securing Financial Resources

Since they are not eligible for any type of governmental financial aid, undocumented students need assistance finding financial support such as private or non-governmental scholarships. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), the University of Southern California Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, and the National Council of La Raza, have compiled extensive lists of scholarships for which undocumented students are eligible. Counselors should disseminate these scholarship resources to undocumented students on their campus. In our work we have also learned about a handful and growing number of private colleges that provide full scholarships for undocumented students derived from private donations and unrestricted funds.

Links to Scholarship and Resource Guides:

- www.maldef.org
- www.usc.edu/chepa
- www.nclr.org
- <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/financial-aid/undocumented-students>
- <http://roybal-allard.house.gov/Students/>
- <http://www.latinocollegedollars.org>
- www.salef.org

Outreach and Recruitment

High schools and colleges should organize conferences where undocumented students and their families can learn how to get into college, navigate college as an undocumented student, and



learn about the experiences of undocumented college students. Counselors can also encourage undocumented students to take as many Advanced Placement (AP) tests as possible in order to save money and fulfill GE requirements, simultaneously. Where available, counselors should encourage undocumented students to participate in dual enrollment programs with community colleges to earn college credit without the tuition cost. Colleges should examine and modify administrative procedures that may inadvertently stigmatize undocumented students. For example, they should ensure that online applications don't exclude undocumented students by requiring a Social Security number to file an application.

Facilitating Transfer

Community colleges are the gateway to higher education for undocumented students due to their affordability. Among community college undocumented students are many who were initially accepted into various four-year colleges but were unable to attend due to cost. Students should be encouraged to complete Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) agreements if available. TAG agreements guarantee university admission to well-qualified community colleges transfer students who meet the eligibility requirements and complete the procedure required to obtain a TAG. Counselors should also explain to students the differences in quarter and semester sessions. Transferring to quarter-based schools will often

pose hardships to undocumented students since they have to raise/save money in a shorter time span. Students should also be encouraged to go on campus tours to learn more about resources for undocumented students.

Social Support

Counselors can serve as advocates for undocumented students (Brilliant 2000). They can serve as advisors for undocumented student clubs or help create a committee/task force that serves as a “think tank” for fundraising and to generate other ideas to support undocumented students. The task force could help establish a faculty mentoring program since most undocumented students are first generation. Mentors can help students navigate higher education, as well as provide social support to help reduce stress.

Informing Faculty, Staff and Administrators

Institutional agents should be specifically trained to be sensitive to the needs of undocumented students. Colleges can develop workshops to educate administrators, faculty and counselors about undocumented students and the educational challenges they face. These can provide the historical and legal context, current information on recent/pending legislation at the state and federal level, and provide concrete procedures on how to better serve undocumented students.

Personal Development Courses

Students should be encouraged to take student success courses during their first semester to learn early on about the transfer process, and/or major requirements to avoid taking unnecessary or inappropriate courses since cost is a major concern. These courses can also help students establish connections with undocumented student support clubs. Getting involved with undocumented student support clubs is particularly valuable because they provide students with peer role models and allow students to share information. The clubs also provide students with a sense of empowerment and official institutional recognition often serving as a platform for student activism and advocacy.

Support Services

It is essential that school psychologists and counselors receive training on the social and emotional experiences of undocumented students (Dozier 1993). Students with anxiety and fear are more likely to go where they sense comfort and ease (Dozier 1993). In fact, these services may encourage guarded students to gradually open up to culturally sensitive support staff about their personal issues; especially undocumented males, who are more likely to have difficulty trusting counselors with their closely guarded secrets. Psychoeducational workshops focusing on anxiety, alienation, depression, and stress management are just some of the services that can be made available to students.

Conclusion

There are thousands of determined undocumented college students who unlike their American-born or legalized peers, are burdened with the added pressures of finding ways to fund their educational endeavors, while facing a variety of social and educational challenges. Despite these challenges they persevere and continue in their pursuit of a college education. The recommendations outlined in this article are intended to provide college counselors with concrete suggestions on how to best support college-ready undocumented students.



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