

Date: April 2021

To: CSU Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

From: Jaquelyn Caro-Sena, CSU Student Success Network

Topic: **Supporting Undocumented Students in the CSU**

Undocumented students* in colleges and universities face an array of challenges unique to their immigration status including a high risk of COVID-19 exposure, economic insecurity, lack of access to financial aid, volatile immigration policies, and discriminatory policies and practices at various campus levels. Each year, 27,000 undocumented high school seniors graduate from California schools, but less than 10% pursue higher education.¹ At the postsecondary level, there are up to 70,000 undocumented students in the California Community Colleges, approximately 9,500 in the California State University (CSU), and about 4,000 at the University of California.

Making campuses more welcoming to undocumented students can encourage more to enroll in and graduate from the CSU. For faculty, staff, and administrators at the CSU, some key steps in creating a more welcoming and successful experience for undocumented students include: being more aware of their challenges and experiences (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic), becoming more informed about campus and community services for these students, and creating a campus-wide approach for supporting these students. This memo summarizes existing literature about the challenges undocumented college students face and the practices that faculty, staff, administrators, and campuses can consider in addressing these issues.

This Knowledge Center memo is one in a series created by the CSU Student Success Network (Network). The Knowledge Center is an online resource—to be launched later in 2021—created by the Network that will provide curated, synthesized, and succinct information and links to support faculty, staff, and administrators in adopting equity-minded and student-centered approaches on their campus. The Network was created by and for CSU faculty, staff, administrators, and students to advance equitable student learning, engagement, progression, and success. It is facilitated by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights) at Sacramento State, an independent research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.

*Note: We use “undocumented students” as an umbrella term to refer to students who were born outside the U.S. and now reside in the U.S. without legal immigration status or with an expired visa. DREAMers, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, and AB 540 students are all part of the undocumented immigrant community, but there are also students excluded from these policies whom we believe are also important to include. For more information on undocumented students, see Immigrants Rising.



Key Findings From the Literature

Undocumented Students Face Unique Barriers

Undocumented students' legal status affects how they navigate institutions of higher education—and it is important for faculty, staff, and administrators to be aware of the unique challenges these students face.² Some of these challenges include high risk of COVID-19 exposure, economic insecurity, precarious immigration laws, fear of deportation of themselves and/or family members, uncertainty about planning for the future, and exclusionary campus climate, policies, and practices.

High Risk of COVID-19 Exposure

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on undocumented students are too recent to be reflected fully in the literature, but based on the pandemic's effects on other students of color and those from low-income families, it has undoubtedly exacerbated existing challenges for those who are undocumented. For example, undocumented students face a high risk of exposure to COVID-19 due to conditions associated with their low-income status such as needing to work during the pandemic, living in multi-generational households, using public transportation, and lacking medical insurance or consistent sources of medical care.³ As with other students from low-income backgrounds, they face barriers accessing education online, including: lack of internet, or computer access; food insecurity; home environments that are less conducive to studying; and difficulty accessing support services, including for mental health. Undocumented students face the additional barrier of being reluctant to seek medical attention or other services, due to fear of deportation.

Economic Insecurity and Financial Challenges

Even though many undocumented students are from low-income families, they do not qualify for any federal financial aid (e.g., Pell Grants), work study, or loan programs given their immigration status.⁴ California's non-resident tuition exemption (AB 540) and the California Dream Act aim to increase access to postsecondary education and alleviate some financial burdens for these students. Despite these state efforts, studies show that undocumented students had the highest affordability gap across all systems of higher education—and in the CSU, the gap was nearly \$19,000⁵ when compared to other low-income families. Some private scholarships are available, but they are limited and competitive.⁶ As a result of these challenges, undocumented students face high levels of economic insecurity and are likely to work multiple jobs, which can impact their persistence and graduation rates.⁷ Their families are also under high financial stress because of the sacrifices they make in contributing to education costs.⁸

Uncertainty in Immigration Laws

California has adopted some laws and policies to help undocumented students achieve their academic goals, but the volatility and uncertainty of changing federal immigration policies create an environment in which many of these students live in constant fear that they or their families could be deported at any time.⁹ Even undocumented students who are beneficiaries of the DACA program face fear and uncertainty due to recent federal attempts to redact the program.¹⁰ These conditions make studying more difficult for students.



Exclusionary and Discriminatory Campus Climate, Policies, and Practices

Many undocumented students have lived in the United States for most of their lives, but when they face exclusionary and discriminatory campus policies, practices, and norms that remind them of their undocumented status, this can perpetuate feelings that they do not belong.¹¹ For example, applying for a university identification card often requires providing a state- or federally-issued form of identification, which presents a challenge for undocumented students and can create a sense of otherness for them.¹² Interpersonal interactions with faculty or staff who may make insensitive comments or may breach the trust of students by revealing their immigration status to others can create a campus climate that feels unwelcoming.¹³

Preconceived notions and unconscious biases about undocumented students can also prevent critical resources from reaching them. For example, large numbers of undocumented students are from Asian and Pacific Islander communities, but these students are typically not targeted for services on some campuses because they may be perceived as a monolithic group and do not fit stereotypical descriptions of undocumented. Due to their “model minority” stigma, they are perceived to not need these resources.¹⁴

Practices to Support Undocumented Students

The literature suggests that campuses should consider a range of integrated actions to provide holistic services to undocumented students through a campus-wide approach. Through this approach, supporting undocumented students can be seen as part of an overall strategy to address educational equity and contribute to immigration reform.¹⁵ It is also important to be responsive to the changing needs of these students, especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

For faculty, staff, and administrators to consider:

- ***Become more aware of the experiences of undocumented students*** by asking about and participating in professional development focused on these students. Encourage your department to offer these professional development opportunities and make sure that students on your campus are included in telling their stories. In order to provide opportunities for undocumented students to share their experiences, it is important to ensure that any data collected or information shared about and from undocumented students guarantees their protection and anonymity as well as maintains confidentiality, especially if doing any public reporting on findings.
- ***Become more knowledgeable about resources*** offered for undocumented students on your campus and in the community, and share these broadly with students.¹⁶ Many institutions may not have resources to serve undocumented students and must leverage community resources. Therefore, awareness of community resources for undocumented students is critical. However, every CSU campus has centers or programs that provide direct support services for undocumented students (e.g., UndocuCenter, Dream Resource Center, Undocumented Student Resource Center).¹⁷ Find out the designated point of contact for this center on your campus and direct students to this liaison.¹⁸

- 
- **Learn about basic needs programs** that may be available on your campus (e.g., food pantry, clothing drives, housing programs, hygiene donation programs, free Wi-Fi or hotspot locations) and direct students to these resources.¹⁹ This is particularly important during the pandemic.²⁰
 - **Connect undocumented students with careers** through mentorship programs, career coaches, and partnerships with organizations and companies looking to hire recent graduates. All undocumented students are already equipped with strengths that will help them thrive in the workplace, but they need access to professionals, work settings and career resources such as resume writing, interviewing, and job application writing. Undocumented students may feel uncertain about their future career opportunities, but your campus can consider providing entrepreneurship opportunities (e.g., how to start a business or consulting practice). Such resources are critical not only for persistence and completion, but also success post-graduation.
 - **Become an advocate for developing a campus-wide approach** for welcoming and supporting undocumented students. This might include identifying routine campus practices and policies (including financial aid applications and processing) that create barriers for undocumented students, and working to change those policies. This may also include identifying state or federal policies that create barriers on your campus and advocating for changes in these policies.²¹

For campuses to consider:

- **Encourage all departments to participate in professional development** opportunities that increase awareness of the experiences, challenges, and strengths of undocumented students. These opportunities need to include engagement with bias and cultural competency training, information about immigration laws, and listening to the stories and perspectives of undocumented students on campus.²² Given that immigration laws are constantly changing, encouraging or mandating personnel to engage in periodic trainings (e.g., once a year, every other year) that provide updated legal information is essential.
- **Create a task force to develop a campus-wide approach** that aligns services for undocumented students in a holistic way, including through a resource center. Actively engage students in these efforts.²³ Conduct surveys of students and examine how existing policies and procedures may cause harm to students and perpetuate a xenophobic classroom or campus climate. Other priorities for task force consideration include campus approaches to basic needs services, medical and mental health services, academic supports, advising, financial aid, career development, legal services, privacy of immigration statuses, and other data for these students.
- **Provide access to medical and mental health services free of charge**²⁴ in order to alleviate any trauma that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Access to basic health care, including mental health, is crucial for undocumented students to focus on their education goals.²⁵ To make such services more readily accessible to students, your campus can consider having designated healthcare providers (e.g., mental health counselors or psychologists) housed in the centers that directly support undocumented students (e.g., Dream Resource Center).

- 
- **Provide information about free legal services** to undocumented students, especially services offered by the CSU on campus.²⁶
 - **Increase opportunities for financial assistance** through grants and scholarships rather than loans to cover educational and living expenses for these students. This might include providing more institutional aid for these students. While campuses cannot use federal or state funds to establish scholarships or grants for undocumented students, there may be alternate ways to alleviate the financial burden for undocumented students such as seeking donors and philanthropic funds. A key improvement is also to provide better information, with online access for all students, about existing state or private student financial aid that is available to students who are not U.S. citizens, along with help filling out the forms.²⁷ Since immigration policies and practices change, all listings of financial aid resources need to be regularly updated, with outreach provided to students.
 - **Offer paid internships** to connect undocumented students with career opportunities in their field of study. Many undocumented students cannot afford to participate in unpaid internships, but it is important for them to gain professional experience that aligns with their field of study through paid internship opportunities.

Implications

Providing a quality education and learning experience requires building a collaborative awareness among faculty, staff, and administrators across campus about the issues that undocumented students face. Adopting a campus-wide approach to welcoming and supporting undocumented students can provide a more integrated and holistic approach that extends beyond aligning services for these students or assigning responsibilities to program coordinators at a resource center. This is particularly essential during COVID-19 and as attitudes about and policies on immigration shift. Undocumented students face a range of stressful situations and barriers as they seek to reach their education goals, yet they also bring to their campus experience a history of persistence and resiliency. It is important that faculty, staff, and administrators are sensitive to the unique challenges students on their campus face, and build on the unique strengths that they bring.

Reflection Questions

For those interested in encouraging and supporting undocumented students at your campus, we offer the following questions for reflection and dialogue:

- What do I know about undocumented students on my campus or in my area of work (e.g., instruction, student services, research/institutional effectiveness)? How could I gather more information about these students and their experiences? What is my campus currently doing to support these students?
- What trainings are offered by my campus to equip me with tools needed to help undocumented students feel safe?
- Does my campus have a center specifically designed to support these students? Who is the contact person there?

- 
- What supports are undocumented students using during the COVID-19 pandemic that help them with persistence and retention? What can we learn from those supports that can be institutionalized for when there is no longer a pandemic?
 - What barriers do undocumented students face on my campus (e.g., accessing resources, pursuing a major or field of study)? How can we remove these barriers?
 - How do the various intersectionalities of identities (e.g., sex, gender, class, sexual orientation) affect undocumented students' educational experience?
 - What are the experiences of non-Latinx undocumented students on my campus? What supports do they use and how do they persist?
 - Is there a task force focused on undocumented students at my campus? Who has been involved in that task force, and what recommendations have been made?
 - How does my campus respond to changes in federal and state laws that directly impact undocumented students? What are we doing to advocate for these students?
 - What is my campus doing to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of any data tying a student to their legal status?
 - What am I currently doing (or not doing) to create an environment that is welcoming to and safe for undocumented students?

Resource List

The following resources may be helpful in learning more about supporting undocumented students:

- CSU website about [Resources for Undocumented Students](#)
- Organizations in California that provide services, resources, or advocacy for immigrants:
 - [Immigrants Rising](#)
 - [UndocuHustle](#)
 - [Coalition for Humane Rights Los Angeles](#)
 - [Central American Resource Center](#)
 - [Immigrants Advocates Network](#)
 - [FWD.us](#)
 - [Higher Education as an Ally: Supporting Undocumented Students Through Attacks on the DACA Program](#)
 - [TheDream.US](#)
 - [Centro Legal de la Raza](#)
 - [California Undocumented Higher Education Coalition](#)



Limitations

This memo provides an overview but is not a comprehensive literature review of all existing research on this topic, nor does this memo provide extensive information about methodologies of the literature included. We searched for literature from within the CSU and from California more generally, but where these sources were not available, we included other pertinent studies. For example, the studies included in this memo focused on states that have large Latinx populations (such as California, Illinois, Texas, Arizona, and New Jersey), but may not be representative of the local demographic and contexts of every CSU campus. Most of the studies drew from qualitative data. Due to the unavailability of research studies focused on supporting undocumented students during COVID-19 as well as limited access to data about undocumented students more generally, the memo drew from a range of sources based in practice. Due to these and other limitations, the Network does not endorse the strategies presented in this memo as “best practices,” and those presented here may need to be tailored to specific contexts within CSU campuses.

Acknowledgments

Thad Nodine and Andrea Venezia provided valuable writing support and editorial guidance. The Knowledge Center team—Breanna Alexander, Connie Tan, and Keena Walters—provided excellent support and feedback in reviewing the memo. Dr. Viridiana Diaz and Erik Ramirez’s content expertise provided valuable practitioner feedback. Pat Davis Design Group provided layout and design skills and reviewed and ensured compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Additionally, Terra Thorne and Kali Madden provided editing and final publication support to help pull this memo together.



Endnotes

- ¹ The Campaign for College Opportunity. (n.d.). California undocumented higher education coalition. Retrieved from <https://collegecampaign.org/undoc-coalition/>
- ² Bjorklund, P. (2018). Undocumented students in higher education: A review of the literature, 2001 to 2016. *Review of Educational Research, 88*(5), 631-670. doi:10.3102/0034654318783018.
- ³ Clark, E., Fredricks, K., Woc-Colburn, L., Bottazzi, M. E., & Weatherhead, J. (2020). Disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrant communities in the United States. *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases, 14*(7), 1-9. doi:10.1371/journal.pntd.0008484.
- ⁴ Huber, L. & Malagon, M. (2007). Silenced Struggles: The experiences of Latina and Latino undocumented college students in California. *Nevada Law Journal, 7*(8).
- ⁵ The Campaign for College Opportunity. (2018, October). Higher education affordability for undocumented students. Retrieved from <https://collegecampaign.org/portfolio/higher-education-affordability-undocumented-students-california/>
- ⁶ Bjorklund, P. (2018).
- ⁷ Bjorklund, P. (2018).
- ⁸ Diaz-Strong, D., Gómez, C., Luna-Duarte, M. E., & Meiners, E. R. (2011). Purged: Undocumented students, financial aid policies, and access to higher education. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 10*(2), 107-119. doi:10.1177/1538192711401917.
- ⁹ Bjorklund, P. (2018).
- ¹⁰ Márquez Rosales, B. (2020, July 13). Many undocumented youth remain in limbo after Supreme Court's DACA decision. EdSource. Retrieved from <https://edsources.org/2020/undocumented-youth-remain-in-limbo-after-supreme-courts-daca-decision/635447>
- ¹¹ Nienhusser, H. K., Vega, B. E., & Saavedra Carquin, M. C. (2016). Undocumented students' experiences with microaggressions during their college choice process. *Teachers College Record, 118*(2), 1-33.
- ¹² Golash-Boza, T. & Valdez, Z. (2018). Nested contexts of reception: Undocumented students at the University of California, central. *Sociological Perspectives, 61*(4), 535-552. doi:10.1177/073121417743728.
- ¹³ Nienhusser, H. K., Vega, B. E., & Saavedra Carquin, M. C. (2016).
- ¹⁴ Bjorklund, P. (2018).
- ¹⁵ Diaz-Strong, D., Gómez, C., Luna-Duarte, M. E., & Meiners, E. R. (2011).
- ¹⁶ Cisneros, J. & Lopez, A. (2016). DREAMzone: Educating counselors and human service professionals working with undocumented students. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology, 8*(2), 32-48. doi:10.33043/jsacp.8.2.32-48.
- ¹⁷ The California State University. (n.d.) Campus support. Retrieved from <https://www2.calstate.edu/attend/student-services/resources-for-undocumented-students/Pages/campus-support.aspx>
- ¹⁸ Gildersleeve, R. E. & Vigil, D. (2015). Institutionalizing support for undocumented latino/a students in American higher education. *New Directions for Higher Education, 2015*(172), 39-48. doi:10.1002/he.20151.
- ¹⁹ Sanchez, R. E. & So, M. L. (2015). UC Berkeley's undocumented student program: holistic strategies for undocumented student equitable success across higher education. *Harvard Educational Review, 85*(3), 464-477. doi:10.17763/0017-8055.85.3.464.
- ²⁰ National Scholarship Providers Association. (2020, April 16). Supporting undocumented students: The impact of COVID-19 and the uncertainty of DACA. [Powerpoint Slides]. Scholarship Providers. Retrieved from https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.scholarshipproviders.org/resource/collection/E6D935BA-0BD5-441B-BD62-6A3E3B3F4D2A/Supporting_Undocumented_Students_Slides_and_Recording.pdf
- ²¹ Cisneros, J. & Valdivia, D. (2020). "We are legit now": Establishing undocumented student resource centers on campus. *Journal of College Student Development, 61*(1), 51-66. doi:10.1353/csd.2020.0003.
- ²² Cisneros, J. & Lopez, A. (2016).



²³ Cisneros, J. & Valdivia, D. (2020).

²⁴ National Scholarship Providers Association. (2020, April 16).

²⁵ Redden, E. (2020, September 30). An especially stressful time for DREAMERS. Inside HigherEd. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/30/undocumented-college-students-report-heightened-anxieties-about-legal-status-and>

²⁶ Molle, T. (2019, August 28). CSU to roll out delivery of immigration legal services for students and employees. The California State University. Retrieved from <https://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/news/Pages/California-State-University-to-Roll-Out-Delivery-of-Immigration-Legal-Services-for-Students-and-Employees.aspx>

²⁷ Sanchez, R. E. & So, M. L. (2015).

Student Success Network 
in the California State University

 **Education
Insights Center**
Advancing Research and Policy
for K-12 and Postsecondary Education

California State University, Sacramento
6000 J Street
Sacramento, CA 95819-6081
studentsuccessnetwork@edinsights.org
<http://csustudentsuccess.net>