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To: CSU Faculty, Staff, and Administrators


From: Jaquelyn Caro-Sena, CSU Student Success Network

Topic: Students from Mixed-Status Families: Broadening Our Understanding of Students Affected by Immigration Laws

A previous [Knowledge Center Memo](#) highlighted the unique challenges that undocumented students face and shared actionable strategies from existing research to support them at the California State University (CSU). In this memo, we build from conversations regarding the undocumented experience and share what the literature tells us about a specific group of students—those who belong to [mixed-status families](#). In California, more than [three million people](#) live in a mixed-status household, and over [one million children](#) live with an undocumented immigrant. According to EdSource, about [one in eight children](#) in California have an undocumented parent. Given the high number of young people who live in mixed-status families in California, it is likely that the CSU currently serves many of these students and will potentially serve even more in the future. From an equity standpoint, campuses across the CSU must create awareness about how immigration policies affect students from mixed-status families. It is also important that they incorporate these students into existing efforts aimed at supporting undocumented students and/or expanding resources to better serve these students. This memo provides insights into what the literature tells us about how immigration-impacted students¹ navigate their higher education journey despite high

This [Knowledge Center](#) memo is one in a series created by the [CSU Student Success Network \(Network\)](#). The Knowledge Center is an online resource created by the Network that provides 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 \(EdInsights\)](#), an independent research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.

¹The term “immigration-impacted students” was used by the UC Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity (UC PromISE) in a recent study to describe students who are negatively impacted by immigration laws (e.g., undocumented students, students from mixed-status families).



levels of emotional distress and financial hardships. Existing research on this student population is limited, but a growing body of research studies and existing promising practices show that equipping students with proper information regarding financial aid, mental health services, and community resources can improve their experiences and contribute to positive student outcomes. Most studies discussed throughout this memo focus on students from mixed-status families across different ages (e.g., childhood, adolescence, young adulthood).

Key Findings from the Literature


The undocumented immigrant experience is shared throughout families.

Undocumented immigrant experiences are multifold, meaning that the effects of undocumented status extend beyond those who hold such status.ⁱ This is often contrary to the common belief that the emotional, social, financial, and psychological impacts are primarily or exclusively endured by those who hold an undocumented status. Children born in the United States with family members who hold undocumented statuses also share the effects of immigration policies. For example, U.S. born children of undocumented parents face the societal and legal punishments of immigration laws and policies intended to legally sanction undocumented parents. Such “multigenerational punishments” show up in the daily social, economic, and emotional lives of mixed-status families.ⁱⁱ

Students from mixed-status families face mental health challenges and are less likely to seek services due to fears and distrust in government institutions.

Students from mixed-status families experience high levels of anxiety due to fears that their family members will be deported.ⁱⁱⁱ They are aware from a young age that there is a possibility of their families being separated and they constantly live with this anxiety. Some students have already experienced family separation and suffer from the emotional consequences of not having the physical support of their family, along with the emotional trauma of having their family members deported. In most of these cases, students are subjected to the challenges of having a single parent, usually a single mother.^{iv} As young adults, their responsibilities (e.g., employment, education) can provide moments of distraction from their parent’s deportability, but social events—especially media news coverage of families being separated due to deportation and/or changes in immigration policies—fuel feelings of anxiety and emotional distress.^v

A recent study that explored the experiences of the different immigration-impacted students at the University of California (UC) echoes some of the shared experiences among undocumented immigrants and citizens who have undocumented family members.^{vi} Data showed that the challenges (e.g., financial hardships, mental health issues) experienced by undocumented students were also shared by students who



have parents or siblings with undocumented status. These challenges negatively affected both sets of students' academic performance in similar ways.^{vii} Their experiences outside the classroom affected their ability to focus in the classroom, including missing classes.^{viii} Fearfulness among children of undocumented parents also impacts their likeliness to seek resources (e.g., medical care, food benefits).^{ix} This fear often stems from a lack of trust in government institutions and fear that seeking resources could make their family vulnerable to deportation. They worry that going to seek resources will result in them having to provide information on their family's immigration status which could expose them to the state or federal government's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. The UC study found that students with undocumented family members experienced nearly the same level of anxiety as undocumented students. However, the study reported that students of mixed-status families did not use services as much as undocumented students. Reasons for the reported lower resource usage included a lack of awareness that resources exist, a lack of clarity about whether resources are meant for them, and a lack of a welcoming environment.^x

Applying for and receiving financial aid can be difficult to navigate.

A majority of students from mixed-status families have parents who work in low-wage jobs, making them eligible to receive financial aid benefits.^{xi} However, to receive financial aid, students must provide their parents' immigration status and income. Such paperwork can trigger anxiety because of fears that their families may be exposed as being undocumented. When parents do not have Social Security numbers, students must take additional steps, which are often unclear and confusing. Students whose parents have been detained or deported face the additional challenges of proving eligibility for financial aid as a dependent.^{xii}

In states such as California, in-state tuition and state-funded financial aid is granted to some students based on their [parents' state of residency](#). For students whose family members have been deported, this can cause significant challenges because of the additional steps they must take and the documentation they must provide. Navigating the financial aid process is not streamlined for students from mixed-status families, and they often have to resort to different sources (e.g., high school counselors, financial aid advisors, friends who are in similar situations) to get accurate information.^{xiii}

A recent report addressed the lack of training and campus coordination among higher education institutions regarding these kinds of issues.^{xiv} This lack of coordination can make it difficult for students to apply for and receive financial aid. For students, the difficulties of navigating the financial aid process can lead to them not being able to enroll in college. Similarly, delays in receiving financial aid packages can mean that students are not able to enroll in classes or do not have the funds to purchase necessary books and equipment.




Students from mixed-status families also face financial hardships.

Similar to undocumented students, those from mixed-status families also experience financial challenges.^{xv} Studies have found that the detention and the deportation of a family member in a mixed-status household results in an average income reduction for the family of 47%.^{xvi} Such economic impacts have drastic consequences for the overall well-being of the family.^{xvii} In many cases, young adults from mixed-status families take on the role of contributing to household expenses, and many do so as soon as they are of working age. This is especially the case for those young adults who are the only members of their family authorized to work or able to obtain a higher paying job than their parents. Some young adults become the sole breadwinner in instances when one or both parents are detained and/or deported.^{xviii} Many students find it rewarding to assist their families financially because they perceive it as giving back to their parents for their sacrifices as immigrants. However, these students may also feel a sense of pressure to contribute to basic necessities for their families. They continually worry about their family not having enough money to pay for food and housing. As a result, these students endure food insecurity and resort to difficult measures such as eating less or skipping meals because of financial concerns.^{xix} They also experience barriers with accessing housing because their parents are not able to co-sign for an apartment due to their immigration status.

Practices to Support Students from Mixed-Status Families

The CSU system and its campuses can take proactive steps to support students from mixed-status families.

- **Increasing Awareness in the CSU about Students from Mixed-Status Families**
 - Conduct research that explores the experiences of students from mixed-status families in the CSU. The UC study mentioned earlier in this memo provides some recommendations for how policies and practices can be shifted to better serve their students. At the system and campus levels, the CSU can collect and analyze student data to learn more about this group of students and find ways to tailor resources to meet their needs.
 - Ensure that student data are collected in ways that allow disaggregation by groups that are impacted by immigration policies (e.g., undocumented, mixed-status families, DACA). Such data collection should be conducted with the utmost safeguards in place to protect the confidentiality of students and their families.
 - Create resources to assist families in understanding the academic journey that their student is undergoing. Embed parental resources in onboarding processes that create a welcoming environment for the student and their family. Ensure that onboarding processes are culturally competent and available in their language.

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- Celebrate the achievements of students who are impacted by immigration. One example is broadcasting online special events such as graduations and making them accessible in a variety of languages so that families who may be separated can partake in the event from another country.
 - Encourage faculty to be trained on the experiences of undocumented students and those from mixed-status families. Ensure that trainings include awareness about the needs of these students and of existing campus resources. Provide strategies for faculty to connect students to campus resources. For example, syllabi and other classroom communication methods (e.g., Canvas) can feature a listing of campus resources for students from mixed-status families.

- **Providing Mental Health Services**

- Support communities on campus that provide social and emotional support to both undocumented students and those from mixed-status families.
- Ensure that mental health services are culturally competent and have flexible hours so that students can access services at times that work for them.
- Use a variety of outreach methods (e.g., social media, posters) to improve awareness about existing services. Ensure that outreach methods are welcoming for these populations of students and include explicit language about the purpose and usefulness of the services for these students.

- **Addressing Financial Hardships and Adapting Financial Aid Processes as Well as Basic Need Resources**

- Assess whether information about their families is necessary for students to access resources, especially important information such as Social Security numbers.
- Support or develop access to a lending book program, library reserves, or online resources of classroom materials so that students experiencing financial hardships can access essential materials and not fall behind in class.
- Ensure that staff at financial aid offices and undocumented resource centers are trained and have access to the appropriate knowledge, resources, and capacity to guide students whose parents hold undocumented status and/or may be in detention/deportation proceedings.
- Advocate on behalf of students for accessible housing opportunities that take into consideration the challenges of providing parents' immigration and/or credit history. An example of student affordable housing in California is the [Berkeley Student Cooperative](#).



Implications

Given the high number of students from mixed-status families in California, faculty, staff, and administrators on CSU campuses must work together to increase conversations and spread information about the experiences and needs of these students. Such efforts can help in providing equitable opportunities to these students. Creating a welcoming and safe campus begins with expanding our understanding of the broad range of people that immigration policies affect. As the next presidential election ramps up, anti-immigrant messages are likely to become even more prevalent in the media. As a result, CSU campuses will need to ensure that students who are impacted by immigration policies feel safe and welcome on campus, along with their families, who play a crucial role in their daily lives. These students deserve appropriate and coordinated financial aid services and mental health support from administrators, staff, and faculty so that they can continue to pursue their educational and career goals. These students bring with them a unique set of skills and experiences and an exceptional ability to navigate the world in a resilient way. These attributes prepare these students to thrive in the CSU when offered welcoming and tailored support.

Reflection Questions

For those interested in developing strategies to better support students from mixed-status families in the CSU, we offer the following questions for reflection:

- Does the undocumented student resource center on my CSU campus provide ally training? Does this training include information about students who may not be undocumented but may still be impacted by immigration policies, including students from mixed-status families?
- What data are being collected to inform practices to support students from mixed-status families on my campus? What reports or analyses are being developed from these data?
- How culturally competent are the existing mental health services for students who are from mixed-status families? What are the hours that they are available and are they held during hours that are convenient for students? Are these services adequately staffed? If not, what can the campus do to ensure that they are staffed adequately?
- What financial aid practices are in place on my campus that may make it challenging for students from mixed-status families to receive financial aid?
- What policies are in place that may hinder students from mixed-status families from being able to address potential future emergencies (e.g., deportation)? If a student needs to take time off from their studies, what processes are in place to keep them engaged and to support their return? What measures are in place to ensure that faculty can provide support and flexibility during times of critical need for students?
- How charged is the local political climate surrounding my campus regarding immigration and immigrants? How might this context impact students on my campus? How can my campus work to support students who experience anti-immigrant sentiments in the broader community?



Resource List

- Immigrants Rising: [Mixed Status Households: How To Apply For In-State Tuition And Financial Aid](#)
- UCI School of Social Sciences: [Advancing Equity for Undocumented Students and Students from Mixed-status Families at the UC \(Presentation\)](#)
- [Advancing Equity for Undocumented Students and Students from Mixed-Status Families at the University of California \(Report\)](#)
- California Student Aid Commission: [Renewing the Dream: Improving Financial Aid and College Affordability for California's Undocumented Students](#)
- CSU website about [Resources for Undocumented Students](#)
- Organizations in California that provide services, resources, or advocacy for immigrants:
 - [Immigrants Rising](#)
 - [Coalition for Humane Rights Los Angeles](#)
 - [Central American Resource Center](#)
 - [Immigrants Advocates Network](#)
 - [FWD.us](#)
 - [TheDream.US](#)
 - [Centro Legal de la Raza](#)
- Mental health services
 - [Latinx Therapy](#)
 - [Asian Mental Health Collective](#)
 - [South Asian Mental Health Initiative and Network](#)
 - [Arab-American Family Support Center](#)



Limitations

This memo provides a brief summary of existing literature but is not a comprehensive literature review. We searched for studies focused on the California context to inform the CSU of its student population, but very few existed. One study was based on other parts of the country, including Ohio and New Jersey. It may not be representative or applicable to areas where CSU campuses are located due to the differences in immigration enforcement policies and geopolitical context. The studies based in California were from areas with higher immigrant concentrations, such as Los Angeles County, which may have more resources for immigrants and therefore may positively impact the experiences of the young adults involved in the studies. In addition, most studies focused on relationships between young children and parents rather than adult children and parents in mixed-status families. Most students and parents interviewed in the studies were of Mexican descent. People of Mexican descent may constitute a large share of mixed-status families in California, but their experiences may not be shared by immigrant groups from other nationalities. 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.

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Endnotes

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Student Success Network 
in the California State University

 **Education
Insights Center**

California State University, Sacramento
Education Insights Center/CSU Student Success Network
6000 J Street, MS 6147
Sacramento, CA 95819
studentsuccessnetwork@edinsightscenter.org
<http://csustudentsuccess.net>