



# In the Shadows of the Ivory Tower: Undocumented Undergraduates and the Liminal State of Immigration Reform

## Executive Summary



The UndocuScholars Project  
The Institute for Immigration, Globalization, & Education  
University of California, Los Angeles

# UndocuScholars Research Team

Robert T. Teranishi, Co-Principal Investigator  
Carola Suárez-Orozco, Co-Principal Investigator  
Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, Co-Principal Investigator

Olivia Birchall, Principal Analyst  
Cynthia M. Alcantar, Research Associate  
Edwin Hernandez, Research Associate  
Yuliana Garcia, Research Associate  
Dalal Katsiaficas, Research Associate  
Janet Cerda, Research Associate

Minas Michikyan, Research Associate  
Monique Corral, Research Associate  
Alicia Ayala, Research Associate  
Saskias Casanova, Research Associate  
Margary Martin, Research Associate  
Nidia Gracia, Research Associate  
Cyndi Bendezu Palomino, Research Associate

## Community Advisory Board

Asian Students Promoting Immigrant Rights  
through Education (ASPIRE-LA)  
Coalition for Humane Immigrant  
Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA)  
Educators for Fair Consideration (E4FC)  
Improving Dreams, Equality, Access,  
and Success (IDEAS), UCLA  
Immigrant Youth Justice League (IYJL)  
New York State Youth Leadership  
Council (NYSYLC)  
Revolutionizing Asian American Immigrant  
Stories on the East Coast (RAISE)  
Student Immigrant Movement (SIM)  
Students Working for Equal Rights (SWER)  
United We Dream (UWD)

## Advisory Board Members

Janet Awokaya  
Fredrick D. Patterson Research Center, UNCF  
Santiago Bernal  
UCLA Center for  
Community College Partnerships  
Laura Bohorquez  
United We Dream  
Angela Chuan-Ren Chen  
UCLA Undocumented Student Program  
Gaby Garcia  
CHIRLA  
Katharine Gin  
E4FC  
Roberto G. Gonzales  
Harvard University  
Nancy Guarneros  
Claremont Graduate University  
Alfred Herrera  
UCLA Center for  
Community College Partnerships  
Tina Kim  
College Track  
Susana Muñoz  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Anthony Ng  
ASPIRE-LA  
William Perez  
Claremont Graduate University  
Pedro Trujillo  
CHIRLA  
Kent Wong  
UCLA Labor Center  
Hirokazu Yoshikawa  
New York University

## Student Advisory Board

Bethay Garcia  
CHIRLA  
Lupe Lopez  
Northern Illinois University  
Basti Lopez de La Luz  
University of California, Irvine  
Arlette Lozano  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Linett Luna Tovar  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Renata Martin  
Brown University  
Trisha Mazumder  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Martha Ortega  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
Pavitee Peumsang  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Luz Rodriguez  
University of California, Riverside  
Silvia Rodriguez  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Seth Ronquillo  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Eden Velasco  
CHIRLA

Beyond our Advisory Board Members, we would like to thank those who generously took the time to review and provide valuable feedback to this report including Leisy Abrego (University of California, Los Angeles), Linda Lopez (Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs), Mark Hugo Lopez (Pew Research Center), Matt Matera (Scholarships A-Z), Kenny Nienhusser (University of Hartford), and Roberto Suro (University of Southern California).



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Amidst the turbulent crosscurrents of immigration reform, nearly a quarter of a million undocumented undergraduates are struggling to find their way in higher education. Their liminal state calls for research to inform the unique needs and challenges of this growing student population. In this report, we shed light on the range and complexities of undocumented undergraduates experiences based on a sample of 909 participants across 34 states originating in 55 countries. The participants attended an array of postsecondary institutions including two-year and four-year public and private colleges that range in selectivity. In this report, we describe their demographic characteristics, experiences in college, as well as their aspirations and anxieties. Further, we make specific recommendations for what colleges should consider to better serve this population. Lastly, in light of executive actions in 2012 and 2014, this data can be used to extrapolate some of the issues that are likely to define this newly protected immigrant population moving forward.

### Characteristics of Undocumented Undergraduates

Undocumented students are diverse in terms of countries of origin, languages spoken at home, and religion. They encompass a range of immigration histories and vary along the spectrum of socioeconomic status.

- Participants emigrated from 55 different countries of origin
- On average, participants had resided 14.8 years in the U.S.; in most cases, the majority of their lives have been spent in the U.S.
- Participants reported 33 different primary languages spoken at home
- 61.3% had an annual household income below \$30,000, 29.0% had an annual household income of \$30,000 to \$50,000, and 9.7% had an annual household income above \$50,000
- 72.4% were working while attending college
- 64.1% reported having at least one member of their household who was citizen or lawful resident
- Deportation is a constant concern. Over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of participants reported worries about being detained or deported. 55.9% reported personally knowing someone who had been deported including a parent (5.7%) or a sibling (3.2%)
- Undocumented undergraduates reported significantly elevated levels of anxiety. 28.5% of male and 36.7% of female participants' anxiety scores were above a clinical cut off level (in contrast to 4% and 9% of a norm population)
- Undocumented college students reported strong longings to belong in American society. A vast majority (90.4%) said they would become citizens if they could

Undocumented students also attend a wide range of post-secondary institutions – ranging in type, selectivity, and size – and represented a range of different academic majors.

- 28.2% were majoring in STEM, making these the most popular majors.
- 48.2% attended four-year public colleges or universities, 42.4% reported attending two-year public colleges, and 9.4% attended private colleges
- 67.6% were first-generation college students (neither parent had attended college)



## The Policy Context for the Undocumented College Student Experience

We identified specific ways Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was beneficial to some undocumented students relative to their financial stability and well-being, access to resources and opportunities, and participating more fully in college and society.

- 65.9% applied for and received DACA; DACA recipients were most likely to be female and attending four-year public and private colleges or universities
- 85.5% of students with DACA reported it had a positive impact on their education
- DACA recipients reported higher rates of working, receiving grants and scholarships, and participating in internships than students without DACA
- DACA recipients reported better access to transportation, more stable housing conditions, and a greater desire to become U.S. citizens if given the opportunity than students without DACA

However, there are also notable limitations to DACA that continue to impede access and success in higher education for undocumented students.

- Policies that determine whether or not undocumented students will pay in-state or out-of-state tuition, if they can gain access to certain forms of financial aid, and in some cases if they can enroll in institutions in certain states that are governed at the state, higher education system, and institution levels
- While DACA has been an important first step toward greater security, the provisional nature had many students asking, “What will happen when DACA ends?”
- A higher proportion of DACA recipients (89.6%) than DACA non-recipients (70.8%) reported ongoing worries about the detentions of friends and family, which are correlated with higher levels of anxiety among DACA recipients

## The Campus Experience

Undocumented students face a number of unique barriers that impact their ability to attend and succeed in college, which have implications for the work of higher education practitioners.

- 56.7% reported being extremely concerned about financing their college education
- 75.6% of respondents attending two-year colleges and 69.4% of respondents attending four-year colleges worked while attending college, which inhibited their ability to succeed academically
- Among respondents who reported stopping-out, 73.9% indicated that it was due to financial difficulties

Undocumented students reported challenges within their campus communities and discussed a desire for safe spaces.

- Respondents spoke of their sense of isolation on campus as they felt uncertain about who they could trust
- Students reported high levels of being treated unfairly or negatively due to their legal status by faculty, counselors, other students, financial aid officers, campus administrators, and security guards/campus police
- Of the respondents with access to organizations, centers, or safe spaces where undocumented students can gather to share experiences, 73.1% reported making use of them; this highlights the importance of these spaces



## Lessons Learned and Looking Ahead

### *Implications for Policymakers*

- Considering that recent executive action will create employment authorization for more than 3.9 million tax-paying undocumented residents who will generate an estimated \$4 billion in new tax revenue, states should offer equitable tuition policies for undocumented students. The review of these policies is especially important for the states with unstipulated tuition policies and the nine states with restrictive tuition policies.
- The federal government should provide clear guidelines for ways the higher education community could better serve DACA students regarding work authorization, internships, and access to scholarships.
- There is a need for closer examination of the guidelines for federal and state financial aid for both, undocumented students and citizen and lawful permanent resident children of undocumented parents. For the latter group, procedures need to reflect changes to work authorization for undocumented adults with citizen and lawful permanent resident children.

### *Implications for Colleges and Universities*

- Higher education institutions should proclaim their commitment to and support for undocumented students as members of their campus communities. This endorsement should reflect their commitment to welcome, embrace, recognize, acknowledge, and provide a safe space for these students.
- There is a need within the higher education community for an on-going dialogue to inform admissions and outreach, financial aid, transition programs, student support services, retention programs, and efforts to assist students with pursuing graduate school or careers.
- It is particularly important for higher education institutions and systems to review and, if necessary, revise procedures related to DACA, including employment, internships, and study abroad.
- Faculty should anticipate having undocumented students in their academic programs, in their classrooms, and as advisees, be aware of their unique barriers and challenges, and be knowledgeable about resources on campus that can respond to their needs.
- Colleges and universities should be sites for legal clinics and other consultation services for undocumented residents in their local communities regarding DACA and other immigration matters. This affords current and aspiring law students with valuable, first-hand experience, and the opportunity to serve their local communities.
- Colleges and universities should provide counseling support and mental health services on campus provided by culturally responsive service providers.



## ***Implications for Higher Education Associations, Scholarship Providers, Foundations, and Corporations***

- Higher education associations and community advocacy groups should be the front-line providers for their constituents about how to navigate the process of gaining access to and succeeding in college.
- There is a need for philanthropy to engage with scholarship providers and the higher education community to develop funding opportunities for undocumented students at the undergraduate and graduate levels.
- Foundations should support research that can generate information about innovative and effective programs and practices.
- Corporations should review their recruitment and hiring practices to afford undocumented students with access to internships and other career opportunities.

