

Distracted: Undocumented Students' Disrupted Academics

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The Undocumented Student Equity Project is dedicated to conducting rigorous empirical research to inform institutional policy and practice, and ensure that universities effectively meet the needs of undocumented students.

USEP was founded at the University of California, Irvine.

It is a collaboration of undocumented and allied undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty.

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Undocumented students are distracted in academic settings by a variety of issues related to their immigration status, including deportation threats to themselves and others, immigration-related appointments, and anticipated or actual changes to immigration policy. These increased after the 2016 election of President Trump who had vowed to end the DACA program and have likely worsened with the legal precarity of the DACA program. These distractions have cumulative consequences for academic engagement and performance. Until immigration policies holistically and permanently address legal vulnerability, uncertainties related to immigration status will continue to create academic distractions.

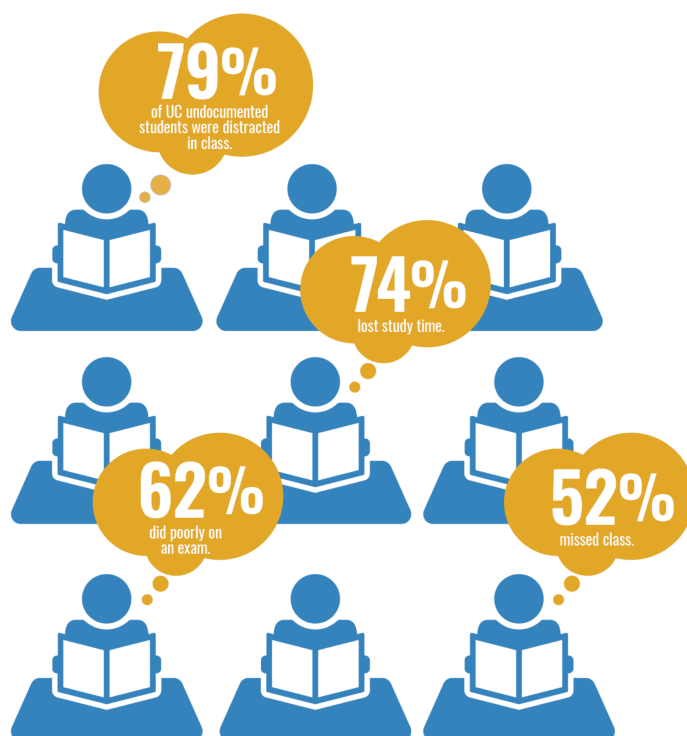
Drawing on 508 survey responses and interviews with 30 undocumented students at the University of California, this brief explores the immigration-related academic distractions that undocumented students face. We conclude by outlining policy recommendations.

Undocumented students are distracted by immigration-related issues while in academic settings.

Most survey respondents reported experiencing immigration status-related distractions: 79% reported being distracted in class, 74% lost needed study hours, 62% did poorly on an exam, and 52% missed class because of issues related to their immigration status.

Distractions were pervasive but intermittent.

Around half of respondents who reported each type of distraction said that it happened a few times a year. Very few reported distractions on a daily basis.



A variety of immigration-related issues emerged as sources of distraction.

In most cases, the changing sociopolitical context led students to be distracted in class and while studying, which contributed to losing needed study hours and doing poorly on exams. Given the timing of our interviews, the candidacy, election, and inauguration of President Trump often emerged as a salient source of distraction. The 2016 Presidential election disrupted many students' academic performance that term: Amy explained, "For the first two weeks after [the election], I was really, really distracted because I was like, Shit, what's going to happen? And even just like the night of [the election], I stayed up late to watch it. And then I stayed up even later because I was crying. And then the next day, I was dead. So it took a few days to level off. But even after that, I was still distracted. It took a while for me to get back on track."

Other students explained how distressing immigration news or related-events, such as those about the future of DACA or coordinated deportation raids, resulted in losing focus. These triggering events have proliferated in the past year as immigration policy rumors and announcements abound.

Many students also worried about increased federal immigration enforcement practices, particularly the threat they posed to undocumented parents and family members. Alyssa explained the energy she invested in ensuring her family's safety: "They [my friends] would put [on Facebook, posts about] a lot of raids and oh, there's a checkpoint here and there. So I would be like checking and screen shot it and send it to my mom and my dad and be like, 'Pay attention!' ... So then I'd try to go back to class and I'd be like shoot, I just missed ten minutes, what's going on?" Other students reported similar experiences when studying.

Finally, students reported missing class to attend meetings and appointments related to their immigration status – DACA biometric appointments, meeting with lawyers, or attending immigration court hearings. These encounters with immigration institutions were usually infrequent but represented large investments of time and energy.

Immigration-related distractions hurt academic performance.

Students felt that their immigration status indirectly resulted in poor test scores, low course grades, and GPAs that did not reflect their academic ability. For example, Stephanie explained how consultations with an immigration attorney on campus had impacted her academic performance: "It's been kind of taking up a lot of my mental space. And I think also, when I get stressed, I tend to not care much about the classes. I don't study as much as I normally would." Thus, short-term and long-term immigration issues that take students' time and attention away from their education and negatively impact academic outcomes.

Policy Recommendations

- 1. Recognize immigration-related emergencies and appointments as legitimate reasons to receive extensions or excuse absences.** This will help minimize the effect of immigration-related issues on grades. Faculty should include these policies on course syllabi. A sample statement follows: "In the event that you have a medical emergency, family crisis, immigration-related issue, or other serious event, please notify me as soon as possible. I may excuse your absence(s) and, if needed, we can develop a plan for extending assignment deadlines and/or receiving an incomplete in the course so you can make up work at a later date."
- 2. Provide programming that encourages students and their families to develop proactive responses to immigration-related issues.** This can include Know-Your-Rights trainings and guidance to develop a plan for if a family member is detained or deported. This will help students feel more prepared and informed, allowing them to focus their attention on their studies.
- 3. Provide workshops that teach students stress management and mindfulness techniques.** This will help students control the impact of immigration-related concerns on their academics. It will also help them learn to recognize unhealthy mental health strain and encourage use of mental health services for severe cases.
- 4. Provide students and their family members with free or low-cost immigration screenings and legal services.** If the campus cannot afford this, partner with non-profit organizations, law clinics, and/or lawyers.