

Limited: Undocumented Students' Postgraduate Preparation

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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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On a practical level, a college education should prepare students to pursue their desired careers and situate them for upward mobility. However, undocumented students have limited opportunities for professional development and face uncertainty about their future ability to be legally employed.

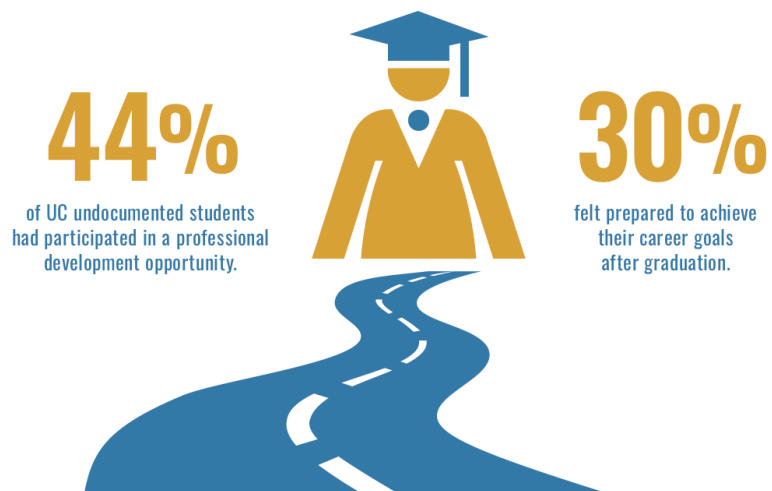
Drawing on 508 survey responses and focus groups and interviews with 214 undocumented students at the University of California, this brief explores the post-graduate preparation barriers that undocumented students face. We conclude by outlining policy recommendations.

Undocumented status creates barriers to accessing professional development opportunities.

Less than half of survey respondents had participated in some type of professional development opportunity: 26% reported that they had participated in unpaid internships, 23% had worked in paid internships, and 20% had held career-relevant jobs.

Students had tried to seek out these opportunities but reported being denied access. Eddie explained, "I wasn't able to do [the paid internship] because of my status. I feel like stuff like that's really crucial for developing those skills to go into the industry. [My immigration status] definitely backfired on me." Berlyn, an aspiring physician, recounted how her immigration status even prevented her from volunteering: "I was trying to volunteer at [a medical center]. But then when I applied, they were like, 'Are you a citizen or resident?' And they rejected me because they didn't know about DACA."

Even when students had DACA protections, lacking permanent immigration status could bar students from opportunities. It comes as no surprise that only 30% of survey respondents felt prepared to achieve their career goals.



Undocumented status hinders graduate school preparation.

Eighty three percent of survey respondents indicated that they were considering pursuing some type of graduate education. However, substantially fewer reported having the experience needed to be competitive applicants: only 22% reported research experience, and only 8% had participated in a graduate school preparation program. Additionally, only 28% reported strong relationships with faculty, suggesting they would not have strong letters of recommendation to accompany their applications.

Many prospective graduate students mentioned how undocumented students are often denied access to graduate school preparation opportunities. They cited a lack of access to federally-funded preparation programs, like the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, as well as limited information about how to meet their unique needs when pursuing graduate school as an undocumented student. This puts undocumented students at a disadvantage.

Undocumented students feel uncertain about their ability to be legally employed after graduation.

Eighty-four percent of survey participants agreed that thinking about life after graduation gives them anxiety. Those who did not have DACA worried about not having employment eligibility, and those who had DACA worried about losing their eligibility.

Maité, a DACA recipient, shared that she had stopped planning for her future due to the uncertainty of the current political climate: “I feel like I can’t really make any future plans because I am a DACA recipient, but the program isn’t permanent. And elections are coming up.” She made this comment in spring 2016, prior to President Trump’s election and the rescission of DACA. At that time, 90% of surveyed DACA recipients were worried about being able to use their degree if DACA were rescinded, and 78% believed that they would have to alter their career plans if DACA were rescinded. Given that the fear of DACA’s rescission has become a complicated legal reality, we suspect that anxiety about life after graduation is now even higher.

Policy Recommendations

1. Develop fellowship stipend and scholarship funds to compensate undocumented students for participating in career preparation opportunities.

This will increase access to professional development opportunities by lowering the opportunity cost associated with accepting a position. Students will not have to choose between working and pursuing a career preparation opportunity.

2. Review all professional development programs to ensure that they do not purposefully or inadvertently require U.S. citizenship or lawful permanent residency to participate. Review whether immigration status requirements can be modified or waived. Change requirements and/or include specific language about undocumented students eligibility and whether DACA is required. If requirements cannot be changed, create parallel programs that serve undocumented students.

3. Build relationships with campus and community partners to create internships that students can participate in regardless of status.

4. Create professional development programs that address the unique needs of undocumented students who plan to pursue employment after graduation. Workshops could mirror those provided to all students with topics ranging from how to select a career, apply for a job, prepare application materials, and interview successfully. These should also address unique issues, including but not limited to: explaining unexpected employment or gaps in resumes, highlighting unique skills built through undocumented student advocacy, navigating hiring issues stemming from their temporary employment authorization (or lack thereof), and exploring self-employment opportunities.

5. Create graduate school preparation programs that address the unique needs of undocumented students. Issues include, but are not limited to: available funding opportunities, how to choose a program considering state laws and policies, planning for a career with a graduate degree, and navigating immigration status while in graduate school. Special attention must be paid to differences between students who have work authorization and those who do not.