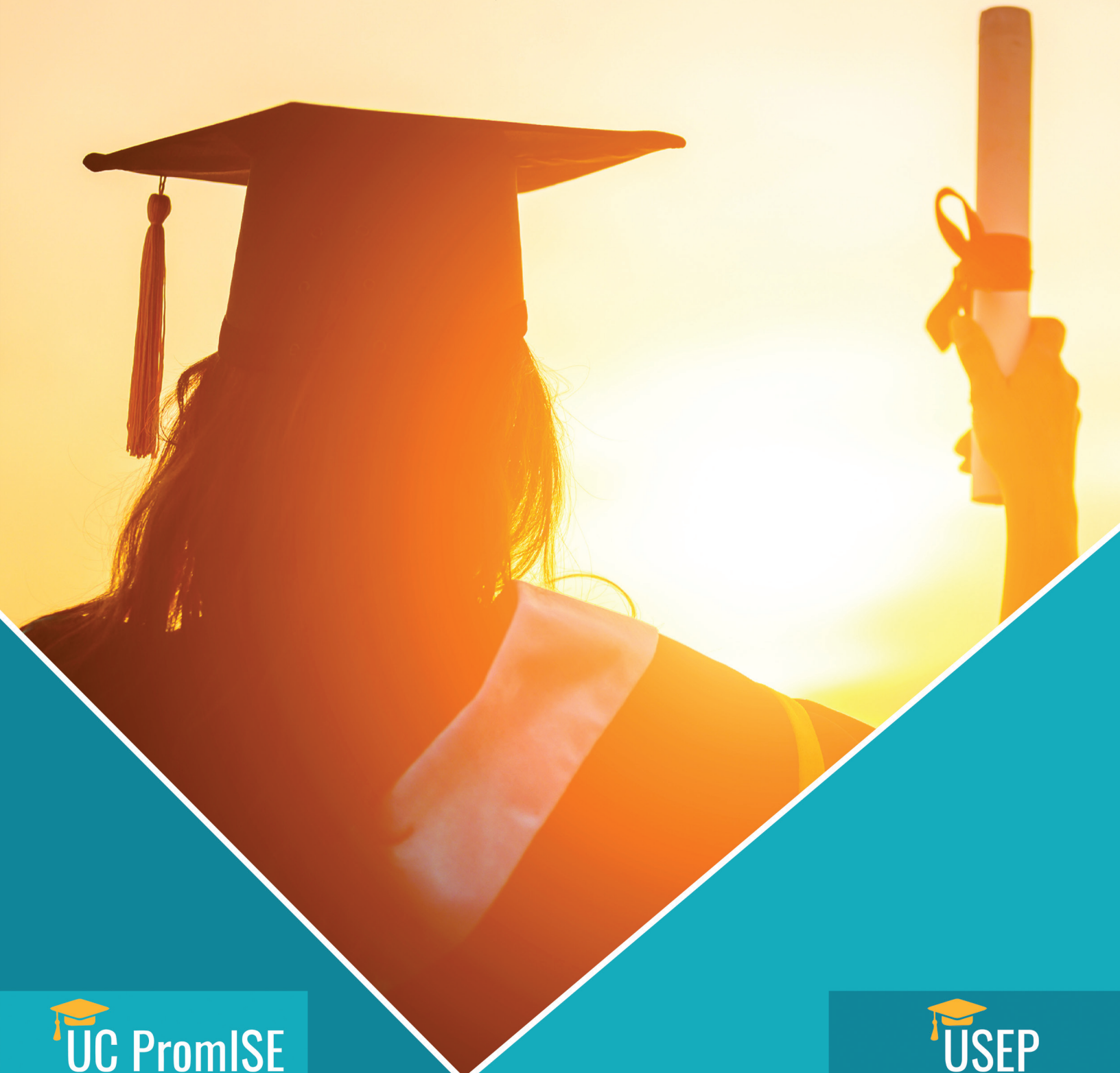


# PERSISTING INEQUALITIES AND PATHS FORWARD:

A Report on the State of Undocumented Students  
in California's Public Universities



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## RESEARCH TO ADVANCE EQUITY AND INCLUSION

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This report is the result of a collective research effort between the UC Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity (UC PromISE) and the Undocumented Student Equity Project (USEP). Both generate research with the goal of informing policies and practices that will advance equity and inclusion for undocumented students.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Over the past two decades, California has opened the halls of higher education to undocumented youth. State policies and institutional practices have steadily increased their numbers, and California now hosts one in five of the nation's undocumented college students. But how are these students faring once they arrive on campus?

This report takes stock of the experiences of undocumented college students attending California's two public university systems: the California State University and the University of California. Based on survey responses from nearly 1,300 undergraduate students during spring 2020, it powerfully illustrates how undocumented immigration status disrupts college students' educational experiences and wellbeing. It offers specific steps that educational institutions can take to combat persisting inequalities and forge pathways toward equity and inclusion.

The following are key findings from the report:

### Part 1: How are Undocumented Students Faring on Key Outcomes?

Undocumented immigration status compromises students' academic performance, educational experiences, and mental health. Though they are civically and politically engaged, these actions reflect their need to fight for inclusion in U.S. society.

#### Academic Performance and Educational Experiences

- 65% reported a GPA of 3.0 or higher while 11% reported a GPA under 2.5.
- 76% reported being distracted in class because they were dealing with or thinking about an issue related to their immigration status and 64% lost needed study hours.
- 38% reported participating in one or more professional development experiences, such as an internship or career-relevant employment.

#### Mental Health and Wellbeing

- 31% reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression at a level that warranted clinical treatment.
- 72% felt they needed to see a professional during the 2019-2020 academic year because of problems with their mental health, emotions, or nerves. However, only 48% had ever sought support.
- 28% reported poor or fair health, nearly three times the rate of a national sample of young adults.

#### Civic and Political Engagement

- 29% had participated in an organization that tried to solve a social problem during the 2019-2020 academic year.
- 41% had spent time participating in a community service or volunteer activity during the 2019-2020 academic year.
- 79% reported talking to people to persuade them about voting for or against certain politicians or political issues.

### Part 2: How Common are Immigration-related Stressors?

Undocumented students must manage everyday manifestations of their immigration status as they attend college. They experience high financial strain and are often worried about deportation, both of themselves and their family members. On campus, they must negotiate a bureaucracy not designed for them and confront anti-immigrant sentiment.

## Financial Strains

- 96% reported worrying about not having enough money to pay for things, with 60% worrying a lot of the time or almost always/always.
- 59% reported experiencing food insecurity.
- 46% reported going without materials needed for their studies at least sometimes.

## Deportation Threat and the Immigration Policy Context

- 39% reported that they, a family member, and/or a friend had been involved in deportation proceedings, been detained, or deported.
- 50% reported thinking about their parent/guardian's deportation once a week or more and 38% reported thinking about their own deportation as frequently.
- Respondents reported moderate levels of social isolation. For instance, 58% reported feeling at least sometimes that they have no liberty and need to stay home.

## Campus Climate

- 44% received inaccurate information about how to complete a university procedure or form.
- 56% agreed that they can present their whole, authentic self on campus without worrying about repercussions.
- 31% reported sometimes or often hearing students express negative feelings about undocumented immigrant communities. Only 11% reported faculty and 10% reported staff expressing such feelings as frequently.

## Part 3: Are Undocumented Students Using Campus Resources?

Undocumented students are using general resources in a limited capacity. However, undocumented students frequently use undocumented student services which provide targeted programs and support and facilitate referrals to appropriate offices across campus.

### Campus-wide Resources

- 24% agreed that their immigration status prevents them from accessing the resources they need on campus.
- 98% used at least one general campus resource during the current academic year with 21% using one or two resources, 36% using three or four, 27% using five or six, and 14% using seven or more.
- The most frequently used resource was the basic needs/food pantry with 53% of students using this resource; a third of those who visited did so at least once a week.

### Undocumented Student Services

- 74% reported having been to an office or met with a person who focuses on supporting undocumented students. Of these, 82% had met with a professional staff member.
- 65% reported accessing immigration legal services on campus.
- 81% of students who had accessed undocumented student services reported being referred to another person on campus who could provide support, services, or resources.

These findings demonstrate that educational institutions must continue to advance policies and practices that will promote equity and inclusion for undocumented students. Most critically, campuses must increase funding and support for undocumented student services. Collaborative programming and joint staff positions between undocumented student services and key campus-wide resources, such as academic support services, mental health counseling, and basic needs supports, will facilitate access and use. Campus-wide commitment will be imperative to foster a truly inclusive educational environment.

## INTRODUCTION

Undocumented students represent one out of every 50 students enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States.<sup>1</sup> California hosts 20% of these college students with the majority attending one of the state's community colleges. However, in 2018, approximately 14% of California undocumented college students attended a California State University (CSU) campus and 5% a University of California (UC) campus.<sup>2</sup> System estimates suggest that there are approximately 9,500 undocumented CSU students and 4,000 UC students.<sup>3</sup>

California has made significant efforts over the past two decades to increase undocumented student access to higher education. In 2001, the state legislature passed Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540), allowing undocumented youth who had attended at least three years of high school in California to access in-state college tuition. In 2011, it ratified the California Dream Act, providing undocumented students access to institutional, private, and state-funded financial aid at public colleges and universities. Finally, in 2014, the state legislature created the California Dream Loan program, allowing undocumented students to receive loans up to \$20,000 over the course of their undergraduate education. By providing financial aid and removing the burden of out-of-state tuition, these laws have increasingly opened higher education to undocumented students.

The CSU and UC systems have also sought to address the needs of their growing undocumented student populations. In 2013, the UC launched the Undocumented Students Initiative, providing \$15.4 million in funding over seven years to build up campus support services for undocumented students. It funded the UC Dream Loan program, established the UC Immigrant Legal Services Center, and grew undocumented student services.<sup>4</sup> UC campuses hired professional staff members, created undocumented student centers, provided additional financial aid, and developed innovative programming to reduce educational, social-emotional, and resource inequities. During this time period, many CSU campuses also established undocumented student centers and hired professional staff members, but without systematic systemwide support, campuses had fewer resources to build such programs and initiatives. In one of its first system-wide efforts, the CSU rolled out direct immigration legal services for its students in 2019 in partnership with local service providers.<sup>5</sup>



Given increasingly restrictive federal policies, this report focuses attention on what educational institutions can do to support the holistic wellbeing and academic success of undocumented students. We present data from a spring 2020 survey of 1,277 CSU and UC undocumented college students to offer a comprehensive look at the current state of undocumented students attending California public universities.

The first part of the report establishes how undocumented students fare on key outcomes: academic performance and educational experiences, health and wellbeing, and political and civic engagement. The second part explores underlying factors that affect these outcomes, including financial strain, the immigration policy context, and campus climate. The third and final part investigates how undocumented students use campus resources to inform future service provision.

Throughout this report, we examine differences between those who have no legal status and those who are beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA provides temporary access to employment authorization and protection from deportation, altering how one experiences their undocumented status. With President Trump's 2017 rescission of DACA and the ongoing legal battle to reinstate the program, a significant and growing number of undocumented students do not benefit from DACA. Importantly, this report demonstrates the unique experiences of these two sub-populations of undocumented students and identifies how their needs may differ.

Ultimately, comprehensive federal immigration relief will be necessary to enable undocumented students to more fully integrate into society. But, in the interim, campus policy has the unique potential to temper the effects of undocumented status on students' educational experiences and everyday lives. Thus, at the end of each section, we offer recommendations to promote equity and inclusion in the university setting. California's public universities can easily take effective, concrete steps to support undocumented students.







## KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT SAMPLE

Nearly three quarters of students who answered our survey identified as beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and about a quarter responded that they have no current legal status. This is more than national estimates that over half of the undocumented college student population was not DACA-eligible and UC data that suggests that around 40% of UC undocumented undergraduate students are not DACA beneficiaries.<sup>6</sup> About two thirds of these students arrived in the U.S. when they were under the age of five years old.

The vast majority of our sample (94%) migrated from Latin America with approximately eight out of every ten participants coming from Mexico. They identified 36 countries of origin, with the next largest groups coming from El Salvador, Guatemala, and South Korea. More than half of the countries reported were only represented in the UC sample. Nationally, estimates suggest that Latinas/os/xs compose only 46% of the undocumented student population and 65% of the DACA-eligible undocumented student population.<sup>7</sup>

Our survey respondents were distributed across class standing, with about a third in the first or second year, a third in their junior year, and a third in their senior year. Transfer students composed nearly half of the CSU sample and a quarter of the UC sample. The higher proportion of transfer students helps explain why nearly a third of the CSU sample is over age 24. Students in the sample span a wide variety of majors with a third in the social sciences and slightly more than a quarter in Science, Technology, Math, and Engineering (STEM) and related majors.

Students' living situations vary by university system. CSU campuses are primarily commuter campuses, which is reflected in our sample where four in five students reported living at home with family. In contrast, UC campuses offer more robust university housing programs and approximately two in five UC respondents reported living on campus; only about one in five were living at home with family.

Most respondents come from mixed-status households and lived with at least one U.S. citizen. The vast majority identified as having one or more parent or guardian with no legal status. About two thirds had a U.S. citizen sibling and an eighth lived with a U.S. citizen extended family member.

Students' parents and guardians have a range of education levels. Slightly more than a third of parents have a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education or less. Only about one in seven parents have some college or more. UC respondents tend to have parents with higher levels of education.

Household income varied with about a quarter of students coming from households that earned less than \$20,000 annually and a third earning more than \$40,000. A little more than half reported that they were working for some form of financial compensation. CSU respondents were more than twice as likely to work more than 20 hours a week compared to UC respondents. On average, students earned slightly more than California minimum wage.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents by university system and total.**

Characteristic	UC Sample (n=667)		CSU Sample (n=610)		Total Sample (n=1277)	
	Number	Valid Percent	Number	Valid Percent	Number	Valid Percent
<b>Immigration Status</b>						
No current legal status	191	28.64	127	20.82	318	24.90
DACA	467	70.01	476	78.03	943	73.84
Other undocumented status	9	1.35	7	1.15	16	1.25
<b>Age of Arrival</b>						
0 to 5	450	68.81	415	69.05	865	68.92
6 to 10	152	23.24	127	21.13	279	22.23
11 to 15	42	6.42	53	8.82	95	7.57
16 or older	10	1.53	6	1.00	16	1.27
Missing	13		9		22	
<b>Area of Origin</b>						
Mexico	503	75.41	538	88.20	1041	81.52
Central America	68	10.19	53	8.69	121	9.48
South America	27	4.05	7	1.15	34	2.66
Asia and Pacific Islands	61	9.15	10	1.64	71	5.56
All others	8	1.20	2	0.33	10	0.78
<b>Gender</b>						
Female	495	74.44	463	76.28	958	75.31
Male	153	23.01	139	22.9	292	22.96
Non-binary, queer, transgender	17	2.56	5	0.82	22	1.73
Missing	2		3		5	
<b>Age</b>						
18-20	302	45.28	200	32.79	502	39.31
20-23	297	44.53	228	37.38	525	41.11
24 and older	68	10.19	182	29.84	250	19.58
Mean Age	21.12		22.59		21.82	
<b>Year in School</b>						
First year	114	17.09	91	15.09	205	16.14
Second year	108	16.19	78	12.94	186	14.65
Third year	205	30.73	207	34.33	412	32.44
Fourth year	196	29.39	152	25.21	348	27.40
Fifth year or more	44	6.6	75	12.44	119	9.37
Missing	0		7		7	
<b>Transfer Status</b>						
Started as first year student	498	75.00	326	53.53	824	64.73
Transfer student	166	25.00	283	46.47	449	35.27
Missing	3		1		4	

Characteristic	Number	Valid Percent	Number	Valid Percent	Number	Valid Percent
<b>Primary Major at School</b>						
Arts and Humanities	107	16.04	83	13.63	190	14.89
Social Science	251	37.63	193	31.69	444	34.80
STEM (Biology, Engineering, etc.)	208	31.18	157	25.78	365	28.61
Other majors and undeclared	101	15.14	176	28.90	277	21.71
Missing	0		1		1	
<b>Living Situation</b>						
Living at home with family	145	21.77	494	81.12	639	50.12
On-campus housing	280	42.04	19	3.12	299	23.45
Off-campus housing, not with family	241	36.19	96	15.76	337	26.43
Missing	1		1		2	
<b>Mixed-Status Household</b>						
At least one U.S. citizen in household	568	85.16	526	86.23	1094	85.67
No reported U.S. citizens in household	99	14.84	84	13.77	183	14.33
<b>Parent/Guardian 1 Level of Education</b>						
6th grade or less	212	32.36	253	42.38	465	37.14
7 to 12 grade	169	25.8	177	29.65	346	27.64
High School diploma or GED	141	21.53	92	15.41	233	18.61
Some college	91	13.89	58	9.72	149	11.90
Bachelor's degree or higher	42	6.41	17	2.85	59	4.71
Missing	12		13		25	
<b>Parent / Guardian 2 Level of Education</b>						
6th grade or less	179	35.87	189	40.56	368	38.14
7 to 12 grade	135	27.05	159	34.12	294	30.47
High School diploma or GED	93	18.64	60	12.88	153	15.85
Some college	61	12.22	46	9.87	107	11.09
Bachelor's degree or higher	31	6.21	12	2.58	43	4.46
Missing	8		10		18	
Did not report a second parent	160		134		294	
<b>Household Income</b>					1277	
Less than \$20,000	164	25.79	125	22.01	289	24.00
\$20,001 to \$40,000	276	43.40	231	40.67	507	42.11
Greater than \$40,001	196	30.82	212	37.32	408	33.89
Missing	31		42		73	
<b>Hours Worked in Typical Week</b>						
Not working	329	49.85	260	42.98	589	46.56
1-20 hours	243	36.82	148	24.46	391	30.91
21 or more hours	88	13.33	197	32.56	285	22.53
Missing	7		5		12	
Average Pay	\$14.62 (n=325)		\$15.20 (n=343)		\$14.92 (n=668)	

Note: Valid percentages exclude missing values. Missing values include "I don't know" and "Decline to state" responses.



## Part 1

### **How are Undocumented Students Faring on Key Outcomes?**

College campuses are responsible for educating and training the next generation of workers and leaders. Indeed, both the CSU and UC systems share a mission of preparing undergraduate students to contribute to California's economy, society, and continuing prosperity. Most often, campuses rely on academic performance and educational experiences as key indicators of student success. Student health and wellbeing is a growing area of concern given rising rates of mental health issues among college students. Finally, campuses are important sites for civic and political engagement as young adults develop critical skill sets to be informed and engaged members of society. Part 1 of this report examines how undocumented students are faring on these key outcomes.

## ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Prior research suggests that undocumented youth are either stellar students or that they struggle to perform academically. We move beyond this dichotomy to examine undocumented students' ability to make the most of their college experience. To this end, we assess student GPA, academic engagement, and career preparation. We find that undocumented immigration status continues to compromise students' academic performance and educational experiences.

### The majority of undocumented students have a 3.0 GPA or higher but also report substantial academic disengagement.

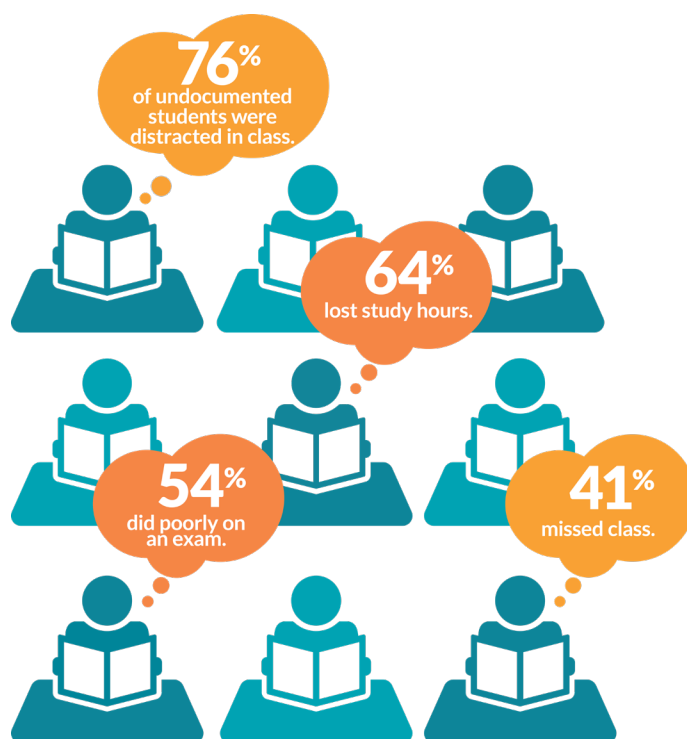
Sixty-five percent of students who responded to our survey reported a GPA of 3.0 or higher while just 11% reported a GPA under 2.5. Though a high percentage of students made the Dean's List or Honor Roll (42%), the same proportion had failed at least one course. It is also notable that students with no legal status were overrepresented in the highest and lowest GPA categories, indicating that this group includes students who are uniquely at risk and also remarkably resilient.

Substantial numbers of respondents reported actions that constituted academic disengagement, including 30% of respondents who sometimes or often failed

to turn in a course assignment. Additionally, 46% sometimes or often went to class unprepared and 42% skipped class as frequently. UC students were significantly more likely to report going to class unprepared (52%) and skipping classes (50%) than students at the CSU system (39% and 32%, respectively).

### Immigration status concerns prevent undocumented students from fully engaging in their academics.

Students reported high levels of academic distraction due to concerns about their immigration status. Seventy-six percent reported being distracted in class and 64% lost needed study hours because they were dealing with or thinking about an issue related to their immigration status; the majority experienced this once a month or more. Additionally, 54% did poorly on an exam for the same reasons and 41% had missed class; most often these happened a few times a year. Students were also distracted from their academic work because they were dealing with or thinking about a family members' immigration status: 66% were distracted in class, 53% lost study hours, 42% did poorly on an exam, and 31% missed class.



**Financial strain, the immigration policy context, and negative campus climate compromise academic performance and engagement.**

Students who reported higher financial strain and food insecurity were more likely to report lower academic performance and a higher frequency of academic disengagement. Those students who felt a strong sense of belonging on campus, however, performed better and were more engaged. Importantly, students who reported more negative perceptions of the immigration policy context – including more frequent social isolation, immigration-related discrimination, and concerns about deportation threats – were more disengaged from their schoolwork. Similarly, those students who heard more frequent anti-immigrant sentiment from faculty and staff were more academically disengaged.

**Few undocumented students access internships and career-related jobs.**

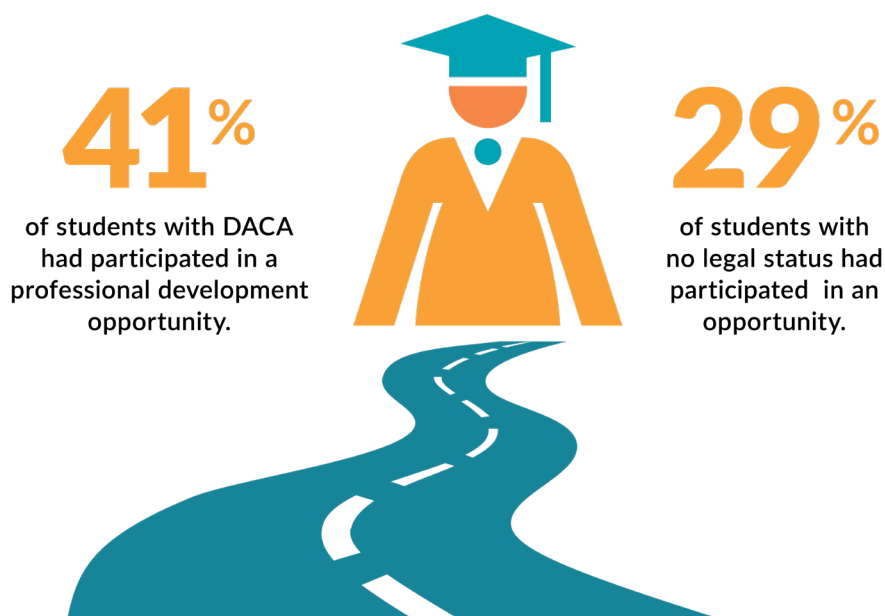
Internships and career-related jobs facilitate the transition of low-income, first-generation college students into the workforce.<sup>8</sup> Undocumented students in this survey reported limited access to such opportunities with only 38% reporting ever having one or more professional development experiences: 18% held an unpaid internship, 15% a paid internship, 14% a credit-based internship, and 15% a career-relevant job.

These rates differed significantly by immigration status as 41% of DACA recipients had participated in one or more of these opportunities, compared to 29% of those with no legal status. This is likely due to students' access to employment authorization. UC students were significantly more likely than CSU students to have accessed all types of internship opportunities.

**Undocumented students express uncertainty and anxiety about their opportunities after graduation, particularly those without legal status.**

Approximately three quarters of students responded that they worried about whether they would be able to use their degree after graduation. Only about a quarter felt prepared to achieve their careers goals. Those with no legal status were more likely to worry about using their degree than those with DACA, but there were no significant differences in feeling unprepared. UC students were more likely to feel anxious and unprepared than their CSU peers.

Students without legal status were significantly more likely to perceive barriers due to their immigration status. Eighty-five percent believed that their immigration status had prevented them from taking advantage of career preparation opportunities, compared to 66% of those with DACA. Only 16% believed that they could pursue their desired career regardless of their immigration status; double the number of DACA recipients felt the same.



## Recommendations to Advance Equity and Inclusion

### **1. Build programming that provides undocumented students with the tools they need to thrive despite immigration-related strains.**

Campuses should offer programming that provides students with strategies to better manage the disruptions caused by their immigration status and help students stay focused on school. This can be achieved through cross-campus partnerships between academic support services, mental health counselors, and undocumented student services. Career centers should provide workshops oriented toward undocumented students, including alternative work arrangements such as entrepreneurship and independent contracting. Finally, campuses would benefit from employing a dedicated academic counselor to build programming with undocumented student services and to provide academic counseling to students.

### **2. Expand inclusive professional development programs and internships.**

Campuses should expand professional development internships and opportunities for undocumented students. Special attention should be paid to ensuring that programs are inclusive of students who do not have employment authorization in addition to DACA recipients. Universities should look to existing models on UC and CSU campuses, such as project-based fellowship programs.

### **3. Create peer mentoring programs so students can learn from and uplift each other.**

Juniors and seniors might serve as peer mentors to help first year and transfer students learn to navigate the university and manage immigration-related effects on their academics. Such a program would simultaneously support incoming students' academic success and peer mentors' professional development.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The mental and physical health strengths and vulnerabilities of undocumented students are often overlooked. This is particularly problematic given that undocumented students face a number of challenges that can interfere with their overall wellbeing. To this end, we assess levels of emotional distress, patterns of help-seeking, and overall health. We find that undocumented immigration status compromises students' mental health and wellbeing, even though they possess many internal strengths.

### Undocumented students experience high levels of emotional distress.

Two clinically validated measures, the PHQ-9 and GAD-7, were used to assess depression and anxiety among undocumented students. Figure 3 presents the severity of symptoms among respondents. Thirty-one percent of students experienced one or more mental health problems at a level that warranted clinical treatment.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, 26% experienced clinically significant depression and 20% clinically significant anxiety. An alarming finding is that almost a quarter of students reported thinking about suicide or hurting themselves in the past two weeks.

Surprisingly, there were no statistically significant differences in depression and anxiety symptoms between students who have DACA and those who have no legal status. This may reflect the limited reach of the DACA program, especially given its legal precarity when we conducted the survey.

### The immigration policy context, financial strain, and negative campus climate are associated with poorer mental health.

Students who reported more negative perceptions of the immigration policy context – including more frequent social isolation, immigration-related discrimination, and concerns about deportation threats – were more likely to have clinical levels of depression and anxiety. Financial strain and food insecurity had similar effects. An important protective factor was a strong sense of campus belonging, whereas hearing more frequent anti-immigrant sentiment from faculty and staff increased the risk of clinical depression and anxiety.

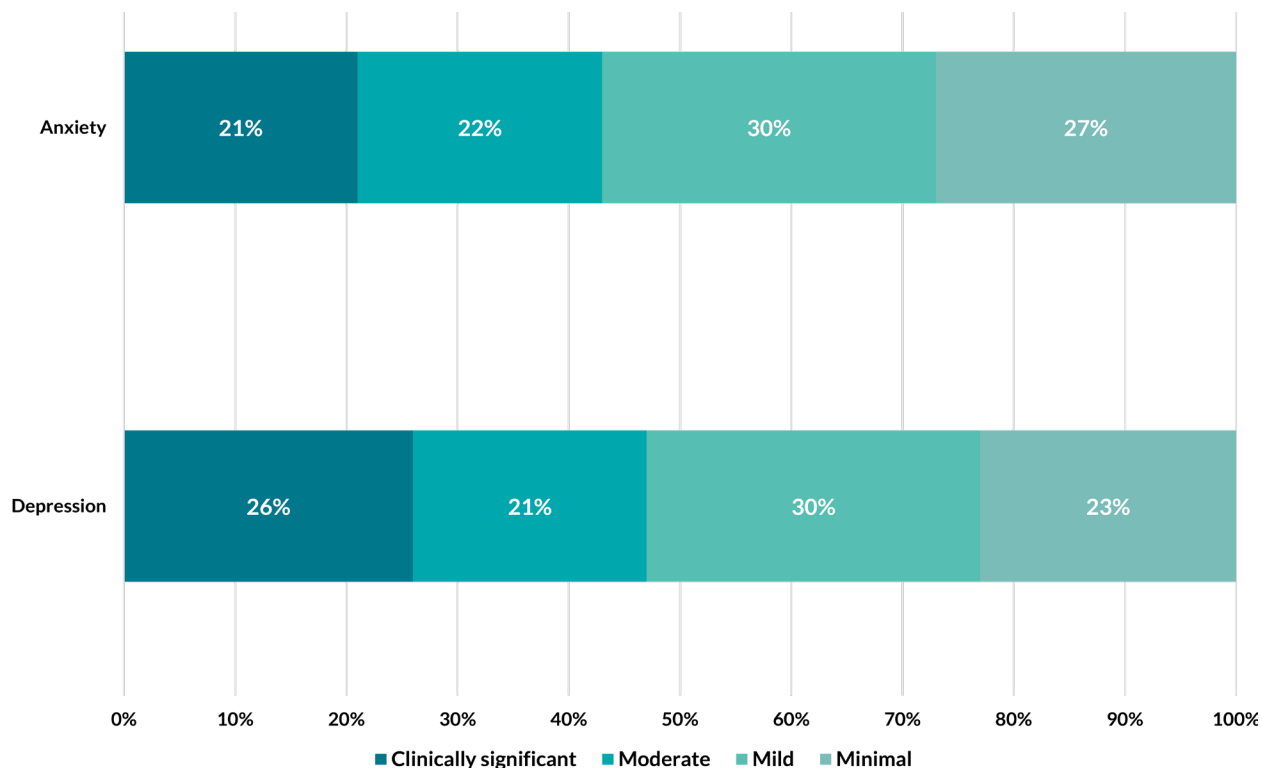


Figure 1. Severity of undocumented students' emotional distress symptoms.



### **Undocumented students perceive a need for mental health services, yet few seek support.**

Seventy two percent of undocumented students acknowledged that they felt they needed to see a professional because of problems with their mental health, emotions, or nerves that academic year. However, only 48% of respondents had ever sought support for their mental or emotional health. This rate was slightly higher (58%) among those who experienced depression or anxiety at a clinical range.

Of those who sought support from one or more sources, a majority consulted a professional therapist on campus (64%) or off campus (33%). Additional sources of support included friends (62%) and family (46%).

A larger portion of students enrolled in the UC system (53%) acknowledged the need to seek mental health support compared to students enrolled in the CSU system (43%). Additionally, a larger portion of UC system students sought help on campus compared to CSU students.

### **Undocumented students report disproportionate rates of poor health.**

About equal proportions of respondents reported poor or fair health (28%) versus very good or excellent health (31%). This proportion of poor/fair health is nearly three times higher than that of a 2007 national survey of young adults.<sup>10</sup>

### **Undocumented students continue to flourish and hold positive perceptions of themselves.**

Although undocumented students experience the emotional toll of having their opportunities and daily lives constrained by their immigration status, they still manage to flourish. Respondents rated the degree to which they experience social and psychological prosperity, which includes feelings of self-respect, optimism, purpose, and living a meaningful life. Their average score ( $M = 44.31$ ) was in line with the average reported in many other samples of college students throughout the country.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, on average, respondents agreed or strongly agreed ( $M = 4.00$ ) that they matter to their community and are worthy of getting their needs met.



## Recommendations to Advance Equity and Inclusion

### **1. Train mental health counselors to be aware of undocumented students' unique strains and strengths.**

Mental health counselors must be aware of undocumented students' strains to adequately address their needs as well as build on their unique strengths and capacities for resilience. University campuses should provide funding for expert professionals, psychologists, and/or undocumented student services staff to develop training sessions for counselors.

### **2. Increase collaboration between undocumented student services and mental health counseling centers.**

It is important not to place the burden of mental health support exclusively on undocumented student service professionals. Counselors should work with undocumented student services to develop orientations about available counseling services, provide drop-in sessions within undocumented student services spaces, and run programming. Healing circles, support groups, and "psycho-education" orientations can all build mental health awareness and undocumented students' capacities for resilience. Campuses would benefit from employing a dedicated counselor whose portfolio includes building such programming with undocumented student services and providing counseling services to this student population.

### **3. Assess barriers to mental health support on campus.**

Given that a majority of undocumented students are not using needed mental health services, universities need to assess what barriers are preventing undocumented students from accessing such supports. Some barriers may be widely experienced; for example, a prior study of UC undocumented students identified psychosocial barriers including students' low perceptions of their needing mental health support, viewing treatment as futile because it cannot address underlying immigration-related issues, and anticipating stigma from counselors due to their undocumented status.<sup>12</sup> However, some barriers may be campus specific and related to the way in which mental health support is provided. Campus-specific evaluations should be conducted in collaboration with undocumented students and undocumented student service professionals whether through survey distribution, interviews, and/or focus groups with undocumented students.

For the past twenty years, immigrant youth have driven the activism that has resulted in new state and local immigration policies in California. Many of these young people have been students enrolled in the CSU and UC systems. We examine the extent to which civic and political engagement persist in this student population. We find that undocumented students are highly engaged in civic life and politics, but their involvement and actions seem to reflect their liminal legal status.

### **Undocumented students express high civic and political engagement.**

Twenty-nine percent of respondents had participated in an organization that tried to solve a social problem during the current academic year, compared to 19% of a 2006 national survey of young people.<sup>13</sup> It is significant to note that of those undocumented students who participated in an organization, 32% had held a leadership position. Additionally, 41% had spent time participating in a community service or volunteer activity during the current academic year.

In terms of political engagement, 79% of undocumented students reported talking to people to persuade them about voting for or against certain politicians or political issues, more than double the rate found in a 2006 national survey of young people.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, about half of respondents reported taking part in a protest, march or demonstration. They also exercised their political voice by boycotting companies or products for social or political reasons (60%) and buying products or services because they liked the social or political values of the company (72%).

### **UC students report higher levels of civic and political engagement than CSU students.**

Thirty-six percent of UC students reported participating in an organization that tried to solve a social problem during the current academic year, compared to 21% of CSU students. Forty-six percent had participated in a community service or volunteer activity during the current academic year, compared to 37% of CSU students.

This is reflected in political engagement, as well. For example, 17% more UC students reported participating in an on-campus protest sometimes or often than their CSU counterparts, 12% more reported boycotting a company or product, and 13% more had signed a petition (see Figure 4).

### **The immigration policy context, negative campus climate, and financial strain contribute to higher civic and political engagement.**

Students who reported experiencing more frequent immigration-related discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment on campus were more likely to be civically and politically engaged. It is significant to note that students who experienced more immigration-related social isolation and deportation threats reported higher levels of political engagement, whereas students who felt a higher sense of campus belonging reported higher levels of civic engagement. Finally, finances appear to have some narrow effects as students with higher levels of food insecurity and economic strain were more likely to engage in some forms of civic and political engagement.



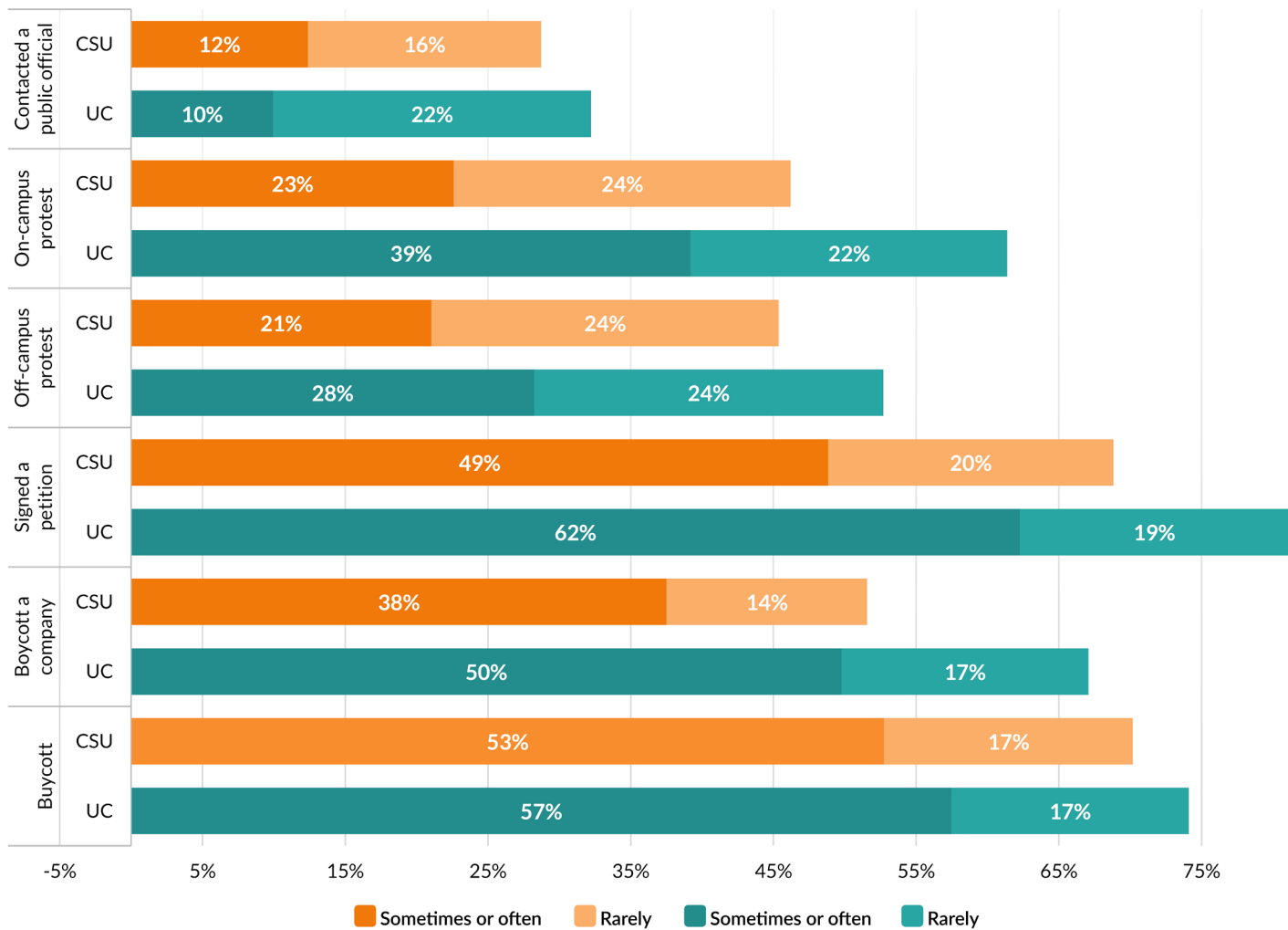


Figure 2. Frequency of undocumented students' political engagement activities by university system.

## Recommendations to Advance Equity and Inclusion

### **1. Maximize existing opportunities for civic and political engagement.**

Campuses should work with student organizations and volunteer centers on campus to bring more visibility to and information about events and opportunities for involvement. Campus offices and student organizations should make greater efforts to maximize undocumented student participation. Flexible scheduling or alternative forms of remote participation, for example, might be more compatible with student schedules. Furthermore, campuses should host and promote political forums about social issues to deepen the political education that students receive in their classes. These efforts are especially necessary at the CSU campuses to ensure their students have opportunities for civic and political engagement to put them on par with their UC counterparts.

### **2. Provide opportunities to build civic and political engagement skill sets.**

Campus offices and student organizations should provide student leadership training opportunities to help students further develop their knowledge and skills. Additionally, campuses should initiate and/or increase opportunities for students to develop their leadership skills. This will likely begin with student input to identify what opportunities currently exist and where the gaps are. It should also include the administration's inclusion of students on university committees, especially those that affect student life (e.g., search committees for student affairs positions; undergraduate education committees) so that students can experience leadership at the institutional level.



## Part 2

### How Common are Immigration-related Stressors?

Undocumented students face a range of immigration-related stressors in their day to day lives. These include financial strain, exclusionary immigration policies, and campus climates that are negative toward undocumented immigrants. The first part of this report established that many of these factors are correlated with the education, mental health, and civic and political engagement of undocumented students. The second part of this report examines the prevalence of immigration-related stressors among undocumented students to better inform efforts to advance equity and inclusion.

## FINANCIAL STRAINS

One of the most salient aspects of immigration status for undocumented young adults is their inability to access a valid Social Security number.<sup>15</sup> While DACA grants temporary employment authorization, those undocumented immigrants without DACA often use invalid Social Security numbers to complete hiring paperwork, accept jobs that pay under the table, or self-employ in order to earn a living. Legal barriers create financial strains that are common among undocumented students.

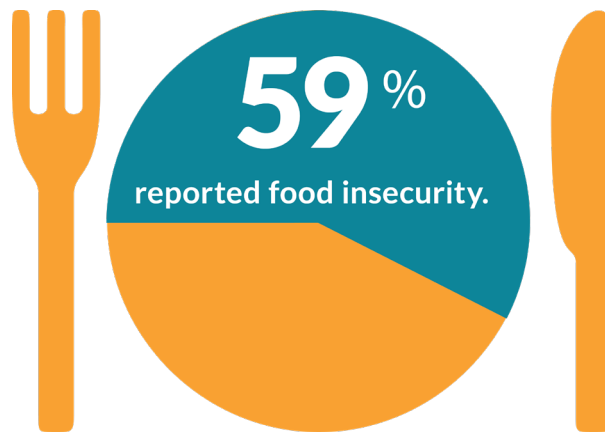
### **Undocumented students, particularly those without DACA, experience substantial financial insecurity.**

Nearly all students (96%) reported worrying about not having enough money to pay for things, with 60% worrying a lot of the time or almost always. Approximately a third reported having difficulty paying their bills as frequently; this rate was higher among students with no current legal status (43%) compared to those with DACA (35%). One in five respondents reported having to go without the basic things they need a lot of the time or almost always. This rate was also higher for students with no current legal status, 26% compared to 19% of students with DACA.

Financial insecurity was significantly higher among CSU students. They reported higher frequencies of worrying about not having enough money to pay for things and having difficulty paying their bills.

### **Undocumented students report higher rates of food insecurity than the general CSU and UC student population.**

The majority of undocumented students in this sample (59%) reported food insecurity, as classified by the USDA Food Security scale. This rate is much higher than among the general population of CSU students (42%) and UC students (40%).<sup>16-17</sup> Importantly, the prevalence of food insecurity was significantly greater among students with no current legal status (66%) relative to those with DACA (57%).



In contrast to financial insecurity, in which CSU students seemed to fare worse, UC students had significantly lower food security; 42% of UC students and 33% of CSU students were identified as having very low food security. This may be linked to diverging living situations as UC students were much more likely to live on-campus where they often do not have access to a kitchen and must rely on expensive meal plans.

### **Financial insecurity affects undocumented students' educational experiences.**

Forty-six percent of respondents reported going without materials needed for their studies at least sometimes; about half of these experienced this a lot of the time or almost always. This rate was significantly higher for CSU students (27%) compared to UC students (20%).

Financial insecurity also manifested as concern for their ability to continue their education. About seven in ten respondents agreed that they have concerns about not being able to finance their college education, and this rate was higher among CSU students (75%) compared to UC students (67%). Three out of every five participants agreed that they worry about having to take time off from school to save money to pay for school; this rate also differed significantly across the two university systems (CSU = 66%, UC = 54%). Higher financial concerns may seem surprising given the lower cost of the CSU; however, the UC offers substantial aid packages that buffer much of the higher costs.<sup>18</sup>

## Recommendations to Advance Equity and Inclusion

### **1. Expand need-based aid available to undocumented students.**

Campuses should provide funding to expand need-based scholarship aid as well as emergency grants. All scholarships should clearly state whether undocumented students are eligible to apply. Existing forms of aid should also be evaluated to ensure that undocumented students are able to access the same or equivalent aid as their citizen peers.

### **2. Develop programming to address economic insecurity among undocumented students, particularly those without employment authorization.**

Some university campuses are achieving this through the creation of project-based fellowship programs and entrepreneurship programming. Such programs will simultaneously expand much needed professional development opportunities.

### **3. Expand access to basic needs supports for undocumented students.**

Campuses should increase funding for basic needs supports for all students. These resources should also be evaluated to ensure that undocumented students are able to access the same or equivalent supports as their citizen peers. Campuses should also consider partnering with community-based/non-profit organizations and leaders to expand access to students' families, particularly at the CSU where students are more likely to live at home with family.

### **4. Create fee waiver and small grant programs to fund educational materials.**

Campuses should create small grant programs to fund educational materials and provide fee waivers for any campus academic services that have costs. All program eligibility requirements should clearly state whether undocumented students are eligible to apply.



Federal, state, and local policies create an immigration policy context that determines how immigration status becomes consequential in everyday life. Increasingly punitive immigration enforcement policies have made the threat of deportation salient, particularly when individuals feel exposed to immigration agents or police presence.<sup>19</sup> This policy context drives feelings of exclusion, isolation, and discrimination among undocumented students.

### **Undocumented students experience deportation primarily as a threat to their parents.**

Thirty-nine percent of respondents reported that they, a family member, and/or a friend had been involved in deportation proceedings, detained, or deported.<sup>20</sup> Of these, about a quarter identified a parent or guardian as having had direct experience with the deportation regime. Only 4% identified themselves as having had such an experience.

Students perceive their parents as more vulnerable to deportation threats. Half reported thinking about their parent/guardian's deportation once a week or more, but only 38% reported thinking about their own deportation as frequently. CSU students think about their parent's deportation more frequently than their UC counterparts; this may be due to the fact that almost four times as many CSU students reported living at home with family. Differing perceptions of vulnerability between students and parents may be connected to students' DACA protections as 35% of those with DACA reported thinking about their own deportation once a week or more, compared to 45% of participants with no legal status.

Students also perceived deportation as a threat to their family stability. Fifty-six percent reported worrying about family separation due to deportation "always." Only 9% never or rarely had such worries. Slightly more than a third always feared that their family members would be reported to immigration officials.

### **Undocumented students report experiencing social exclusion and, to a lesser extent, discrimination due to immigration policy.**

Participants reported moderate levels of social exclusion. For instance, 58% reported feeling at least sometimes that they have no liberty and need to stay home because of immigration policy. Almost half of the sample reported that they avoid public locations such as parks or neighborhoods at least sometimes.

Reports of immigration-related discrimination were fairly low on average. However, almost half perceived that others believe they have the right to treat immigrants unfairly or poorly at least sometimes. About a third reported being treated unfairly at restaurants or stores and experiencing immigration-related exploitation at work as frequently.

In all, students with no legal status reported significantly higher levels of social exclusion and discrimination than those with DACA, but these effects were fairly small.

### **Undocumented students are attuned to anti-immigrant sentiment at the national level.**

Over 90% of respondents felt that the U.S. is either very or somewhat unwelcoming of immigrants. In contrast, only 18.5% felt the same about the California state government, and 29% about their local government. This indicates students' ability to disentangle federal and local immigration policies, allowing them to feel more welcome if they focus on more local policies and rhetoric.

## Recommendations to Advance Equity and Inclusion

### 1. Provide “Know Your Rights” trainings and materials to students and their families.

Campuses should educate students on their rights when interacting with police and immigration authorities. Given their preoccupation with parental deportation, efforts should be made to empower students to share this information with their parents and family members. Undocumented student services could distribute materials at their offices and on their websites. Materials should be available in multiple languages and could include short training videos, infographics, family preparedness plan materials and wallet-sized “red cards” that detail one’s rights.<sup>21</sup> University systems could partner with local non-profits and legal services to develop standard materials; this would ensure their legal accuracy and reduce the burden on undocumented student services.

### 2. Advocate for immigration policies that will promote the inclusion of undocumented young adults and their families.

Universities must recognize that immigration policy is directly linked to higher education policy and student success. Leadership should advocate for the maintenance of policies, like DACA, which have improved undocumented student outcomes, as well as the creation of new policy, such as comprehensive immigration reform and a pathway to citizenship. State and local policies should also be advocated for as these impact the salience of undocumented status in everyday life.

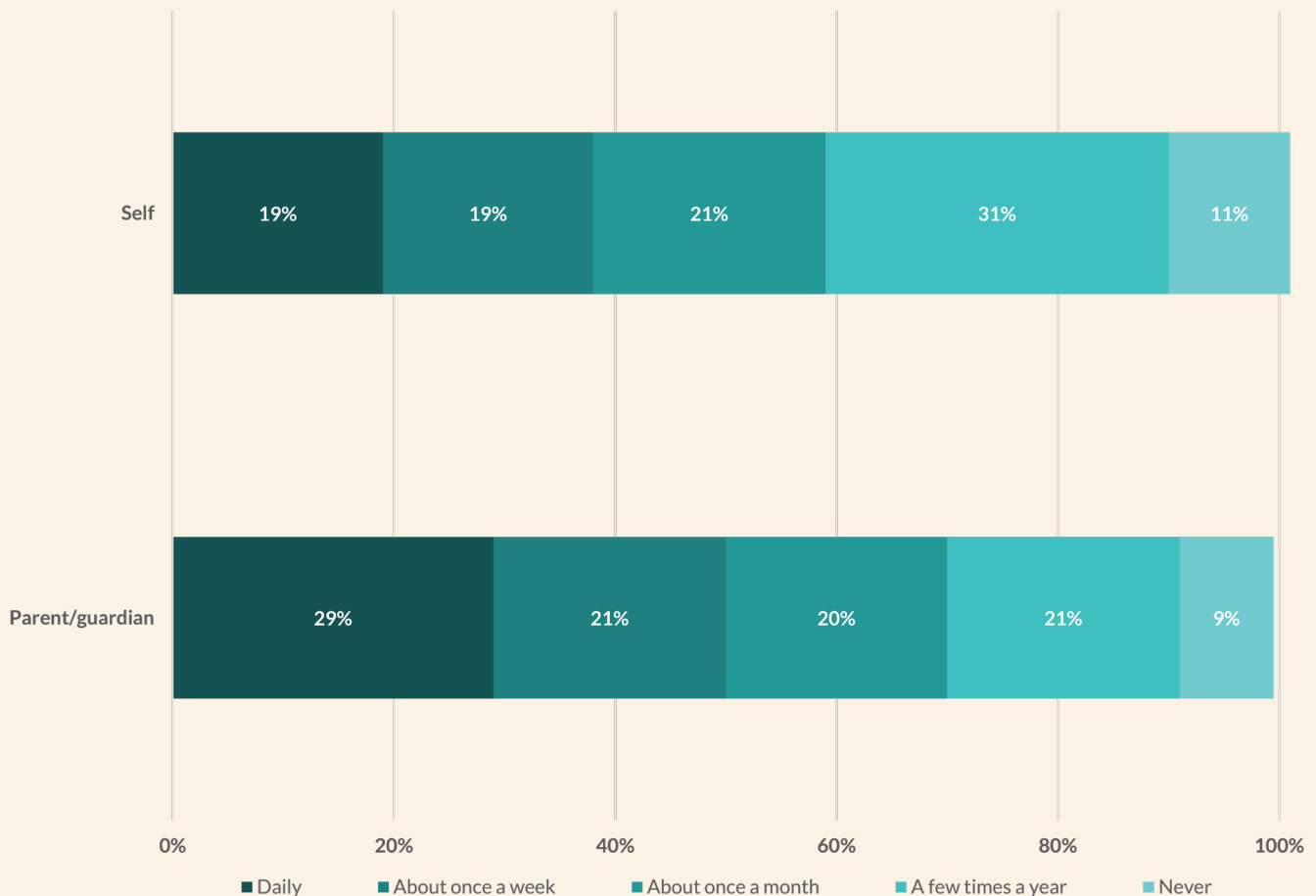


Figure 3. Frequency that undocumented students think about deportation.

Immigration status can function as a structural barrier that results in being denied access to resources on campus or a source of interpersonal exclusion, such as when exposed to anti-immigrant sentiment. A negative campus climate may compromise feelings of belonging, which is known to decrease the likelihood a student will excel academically and graduate.<sup>22-23</sup> We find that undocumented students experience simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary campus climates.

### **Undocumented students are disadvantaged when seeking campus information, resources, and services from staff.**

Twenty-eight percent of undocumented students reported being denied access to campus resources due to their immigration status. Those with no legal status were more likely to report being denied access, 36% compared to 26% of DACA recipients. When seeking access to information, resources, and services, 36% reported needing to educate staff about their eligibility, and 44% received inaccurate information about how to complete a procedure or form. Such inquiries also required significant time and effort; 58% agreed that it was stressful to get answer about an issue related to being an undocumented student and 44% agreed that it takes a lot of time.

UC students were more likely to report difficulties accessing resources. A third of UC respondents reported being denied access to resources, compared to 24% of CSU students. UC students were also significantly more likely to report having to educate staff about their eligibility or receiving inaccurate information. It is unclear if these system differences are due to diverging campus practices for serving undocumented students, or differences in the availability of and students' attempts to access campus resources.

### **Pro-immigrant sentiment is more common than anti-immigrant sentiment on campus.**

About three quarters of students had heard faculty, staff, and students express positive feelings about undocumented immigrant communities either sometimes or often. It was uncommon for students

to hear faculty and staff express negative feelings about the population as frequently (11% and 10% respectively). However, 31% of students reported sometimes or often hearing negative comments from their peers.

Despite occupying the same campus spaces, DACA recipients were more likely to hear positive expressions. Seventy-seven percent of DACA recipients reported sometimes or often witnessing both faculty and staff express positive feelings. However, these rates drop almost 10% among those with no legal status. This may indicate that positive expressions about undocumented communities are focused on the DACA program and its beneficiaries, leaving those with no legal status to perceive a less supportive social context.

Additionally, CSU respondents were more likely to report a positive climate. The percentage of CSU students who reported sometimes and often hearing positive expressions from faculty and staff were 6% and 9% higher than among UC respondents. They were also more likely to report never hearing negative expressions from faculty, staff, and students, with proportions 10-12% higher than UC respondents.

### **The majority of undocumented students feel a sense of belonging on campus.**

Sixty-three percent of respondents agreed that they feel a sense of belonging to their university and also see themselves as part of the university community. Fewer (56%) agreed that they can present their whole, authentic self on campus without worrying about repercussions. Only 13-17% of respondents disagreed with these sentiments. Notably, UC undocumented students were significantly less likely to agree with all these statements.

## Recommendations to Advance Equity and Inclusion

### 1. Require professional development training for staff who regularly provide information or process forms relating to undocumented student needs.

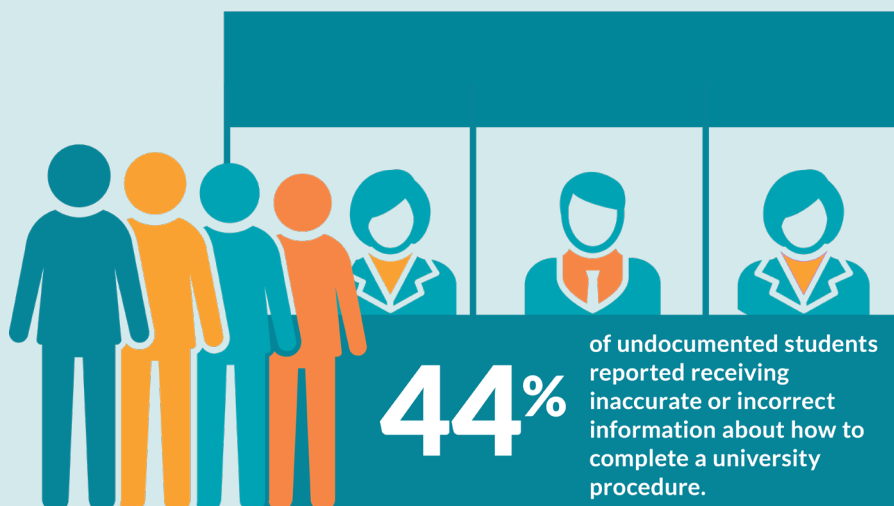
All offices should evaluate current processes and implement needed training so that staff, particularly those on the front-line, can provide undocumented students with correct information in a timely manner. Training should be tailored to the specific policies relevant to each office. Key sites include admissions, financial aid, and the registrar's office as they enforce key state policies that enhance undocumented students' access to the university; however, all campus offices, including student affairs and academic affairs, likely implement programs that will need to account for the needs of undocumented students. The CSU and UC systems should also create a frequently asked questions (FAQ) web resource for undocumented student needs to improve efficiencies. Training and FAQs must be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure they reflect frequently shifting policy.

### 2. Ensure ally training curriculum includes discussions of campus climate and individual strategies for improving climate.

Ally trainings have become a common way for campuses to promote a safe and welcoming environment for undocumented students. These optional trainings should supplement required professional development training. Curriculum should include ways to promote positive climate for students with no legal status as well as bystander training to prepare faculty and staff to address anti-immigrant sentiment, especially from students. Undocumented students should be involved in the development and evaluation of trainings to address the unique needs of each campus.

### 3. Host a convening of CSU and UC staff, administrators, and faculty to explore best practices to improve campus climate for undocumented students.

It is surprising that UC students perceived their campus climate as more negative than CSU students given the UC's substantial investment in undocumented student services and continued advocacy for DACA. A convening between the two systems would enable key campus personnel to examine their campus practices and identify ways to improve campus climate. Attendees could be encouraged to present their practices to identify what protocols work well and how others could be improved.





## Part 3

### **Are Undocumented Students Using Campus Resources?**

Universities most often aim to address inequities by providing resources and services to students. Campuses provide academic, social, emotional, and wellbeing support to all students through academic support services, student affairs offices and identity-based centers, basic needs supports and food pantries, counseling services, and student health centers. Additionally, campuses and university systems have established dedicated undocumented student services to meet the unique needs of the undocumented student population. Part 3 of this report examines which resources and services undocumented students use so that campuses can maximize their impact.

Undocumented students can navigate college and thrive on campus through their use of campus-wide resources. Students may access these services as an initial attempt to gain support or after a referral from undocumented student services. Given their availability to all students, these campus-wide resources presume that undocumented students need and can be served through the same support structures used by all students. We find that undocumented students use these general resources in a limited capacity, possibly indicating that such broad-based support is either insufficient or inaccessible to them.

**A sizable group of undocumented students feel that their immigration status prevents them from accessing campus resources, especially among those without legal status.**

Twenty-four percent of respondents agreed that their immigration status prevents them from accessing the resources they need on campus. Those with no legal status were significantly more likely to agree with this sentiment than those with DACA (31% vs. 21%). Additionally, those in the UC system were significantly more likely to agree with this sentiment than those in the CSU (27% vs. 20%).

**Undocumented students are using campus resources, but not as frequently as may be warranted.**

Our survey asked respondents how frequently they used eight different types of common campus resources, including academic counselors, academic support services, peer tutoring, the career center, identity-based centers, basic needs/food pantry, student health center, and mental health counseling. Almost all respondents used at least one of these

resources during the current academic year with 21% using one or two resources, 36% using three or four, 27% using five or six, and 14% using seven or more.

Students were most likely to have used academic services with 85% visiting an academic counselor and 63% seeking academic support services. The next most used services were the student health center and basic needs/food pantry, indicating the critical value of basic needs support.

However, the majority of those who used services only did so a few times a year. For example, only 37% of students who used academic support services did so once a month or more. The most frequently used service was the basic needs/food pantry with the majority of the 53% of students who used this resource visiting once a month or more; a third visited at least once a week.

Importantly, those with no legal status were more likely to use a higher number of resources, with 46% using five or more resources compared to 39% of those with DACA. This group was also significantly more likely to use academic support services and the basic needs/food pantry more frequently.

**CSU students are less likely to use campus resources than their UC counterparts.**

Only 36% of CSU students reported using five or more resources during the current academic year, compared to 45% of the UC students. Further, CSU students were less likely to have used each of the resource types, with the exception of the academic counselors where there was no difference. Of those who use each resource, CSU students did so less frequently than their UC peers.

## Recommendations to Advance Equity and Inclusion

### **1. Review policies and practices to ensure undocumented students feel comfortable with and entitled to use campus resources.**

Given that immigration status shapes how students feel about accessing resources on campus, universities need to make sure that students do not experience their immigration status as a barrier to resource use. This may include explicitly stating that certain services are available to undocumented students, developing alternative services when they are not eligible, and ensuring that services are provided in a way that makes undocumented students feel excluded.

### **2. Increase funding and support for basic needs services.**

Campuses should expand basic needs services as these are one of the most used campus resources and address one of the primary forms of financial strain among students. Such services could also be a point of contact for undocumented student services to build relationships with the most vulnerable undocumented students and connect them to other services across campus. Placing a campus social worker within basic needs services could provide additional wrap-around services.

### **3. Assess barriers to resource use on campus.**

Given that few undocumented students are using needed resources, universities need to assess what barriers are preventing undocumented students from accessing such supports. Barriers may stem from campus policies and practices, individuals' feelings and constraints, and immigration status-related limitations. Evaluations of this sort should be conducted in collaboration with undocumented students and undocumented student service professionals.

## UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT SERVICES

All CSU and UC campuses have dedicated undocumented student services with professional staff members who provide support services and targeted programming for undocumented students. These holistic support services address a wide range of financial, academic, social-emotional, wellbeing, and immigration policy-related strains. We find that undocumented students frequently use these targeted services, suggesting that they are an integral part of undocumented students' campus experiences.

### Undocumented students overwhelmingly use undocumented student services.

Seventy-four percent of respondents reported having been to an office or met with a person who focuses on supporting undocumented students. Of those who said that they had done so, 89% had visited the program office, 82% had met with a professional staff member, and 75% had met with a student staff member. About two of every five students who reported using services had done so once a month or more. Notably, students with no legal status used services more frequently.

Those who had accessed undocumented student services attended a broad range of events. Finance-related events, such as workshops about the California Dream Act or financial wellness, were most attended, with about half of students responding that they had attended at least one. Between 40% to 50% attended social, immigration law, and academic events. Wellness and professional development events were the least attended (30%).

### Immigration legal services are well used, particularly among DACA recipients and UC students.

Sixty-five percent of students reported using campus immigration legal services, with the vast majority doing so a few times a year. Those with DACA were more likely to use them, 67% versus 59% of those with no legal status. These differences may be explained by DACA recipients' need to renew their protections every two years. UC students were also more likely to use legal services, 68% compared to 60% of CSU students.

### Undocumented student services are key bridges to campus-wide resources.

Eighty-one percent of respondents who had used undocumented student services reported being referred to another person on campus who could provide support, services, or resources. Indeed, students who had used undocumented student services were more likely to have also used campus-wide resources. For example, the number of students who used the basic needs/food pantry was 20% higher among those who had visited undocumented student services compared to those who had not (59% vs. 39%). Similarly, the percentage of students who had used mental health counseling was almost double (31% vs. 18%). Differences were significant, but smaller, for academic-related services.





## Recommendations to Advance Equity and Inclusion

### **1. Increase funding and support for undocumented student services.**

Undocumented student services are well used, but they are also likely overtaxed from meeting the multiple needs of this student population. Funding should be allocated to hire additional staff and expand programming. Joint staff positions with other key campus services, such as academic support services, basic needs, and mental health counseling, would help bridge these services. Such positions would also reduce the unrealistic expectation that undocumented student service professionals have deep expertise in multiple areas.

### **2. Identify staff members to serve as points of contact in key campus offices and develop collaborative programming with undocumented student services.**

Efforts to support undocumented students should not reside solely with undocumented student services. Training a point person within various resource offices will facilitate additional referrals between campus-wide resources and undocumented student services. These point people can also collaborate with undocumented student services to develop relevant programming. When advancing these efforts, care should be taken to ensure offices work together as partners, rather than placing the burden solely on undocumented student services.

## CONCLUSION

The year 2021 marks the twentieth anniversary of the first state laws that opened higher education to undocumented youth. In 2001, Texas and California established in-state college tuition rates for undocumented youth who attended high school in their states. Since then, California has continually led the way with pioneering state policies and institutional practices, including allowing undocumented students to access financial aid and establishing critical support systems and innovative opportunities for these young people. Despite all the progress that we have made, there is still work to be done to ensure equitable and inclusive educational experiences for the state's undocumented youth.

By offering a comprehensive assessment of undocumented students' experiences at California's public universities, we show that immigration status continues to create barriers for today's undocumented students. Some are flourishing, but many struggle to make the most of their college experiences. The California State University and University of California systems have a unique opportunity to advance equity and inclusion for this student group. It is vital that these two systems commit institutional resources to implement the recommendations provided in this report. Doing so will enable undocumented students to thrive in higher education and emerge alongside their peers as the next leaders of the state.



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## APPENDIX A: DATA AND METHODS

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Survey data were collected by the UC Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity and the Undocumented Student Equity Project. In Spring 2020, UC PromISE fielded a survey of UC students with immigrant parents to assess the extent to which immigration-related policies produce inequalities in the educational and wellbeing outcomes of undocumented students and citizen students with undocumented parents; about a quarter of survey respondents were undocumented students. CSU undocumented students were simultaneously administered the same survey. All project activities received approval from the IRB at UC Irvine.

The survey was administered online from March to June 2020. It included questions about academic performance, educational experiences, health and wellbeing, political and civic engagement, the immigration policy context, institutional context and resource use, and self and family demographics. All items were pilot tested to ensure validity.

Participants were recruited at all nine UC undergraduate campuses and nine of the 23 CSU campuses. CSU campuses were selected with attention to matching the geographic location of UC campuses. Recruitment announcements were distributed widely, including emails and social media posts from each campus' undocumented student support services office, faculty teaching large general education courses and ethnic studies courses, departmental and university office newsletters, and undocumented student organizations.

The survey was administered via Qualtrics with an estimated completion time of 25–35 minutes. Participants had to self-identify as being over 18, having at least one immigrant parent, and being a currently enrolled undergraduate student at a UC or CSU campus. The undocumented subgroup had to identify as being born outside of the United States and having no permanent legal status (e.g. no legal status, DACA, Temporary Protected Status, or some other status they considered to be undocumented). Respondents were emailed a \$10 electronic gift card after completing the survey. All responses were reviewed for validity; incomplete responses, ineligible respondents, and suspected fabricated responses were removed using a detailed protocol.

The COVID-19 pandemic began shortly after we launched our survey. We temporarily paused recruitment during the second half of March to adjust our recruitment plans and revise our survey instrument. Responses begun after March 30 were instructed to answer the questions based on what was typical before the COVID-19 crisis occurred.

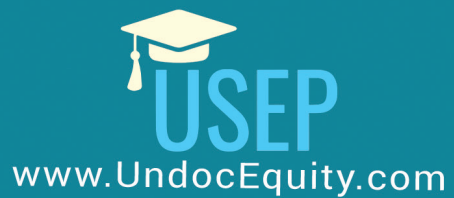
The full sample of undocumented students consists of 1,277 respondents, with 667 attending a UC and 610 a CSU. Sample sizes at the nine UC campuses ranged from a minimum of 26 to a maximum of 147 and from 30 to 106 at the nine focus CSU campuses. An additional 28 responses came from nine other CSU campuses, with a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 10.

All statistics reported were calculated using case deletion of missing responses for the specific variable or variables being analyzed. All reported comparisons between university system and immigration status were statistically significant and tested using a chi-squared test. Bivariate analyses used Spearman or Pearson correlations between ordinal or continuous variables and t-tests to compare differences across groups for continuous outcomes. We used  $p < 0.05$  to designate statistical significance.

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