

Struggling: Undocumented Students' Financial Need

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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.

For more information:

www.UndocEquity.com



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Undocumented Student
Equity Project

Undocumented students face several challenges while pursuing a college education. Financial barriers pose a unique obstacle for undocumented students across the nation because they cannot access many forms of financial aid. However, the California DREAM Act and University of California institutional aid programs allow Californian undocumented students to receive need-based financial aid if they qualify for in-state tuition, narrowing the gap between undocumented and citizen students from low-income backgrounds. Despite this, UC undocumented students have persisting financial concerns.

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

UC undocumented students rely on grant and scholarship aid to cover their educational expenses.

Almost all survey participants reported relying on grant and scholarship aid to cover their educational expenses. Most received enough aid to cover tuition and fees, which totaled around \$13,400 for California residents during the 2015–2016 school year. This is a clear testament to the success of state and institutional aid programs.

However, undocumented Californian students who do not attend the UC system often do not have access to as much institutional aid, meaning that their aid packages may not cover their full tuition costs. Undocumented students who live in states without tuition equity or state financial aid policies also struggle to pay for their education.

UC undocumented students struggle to cover additional educational expenses.

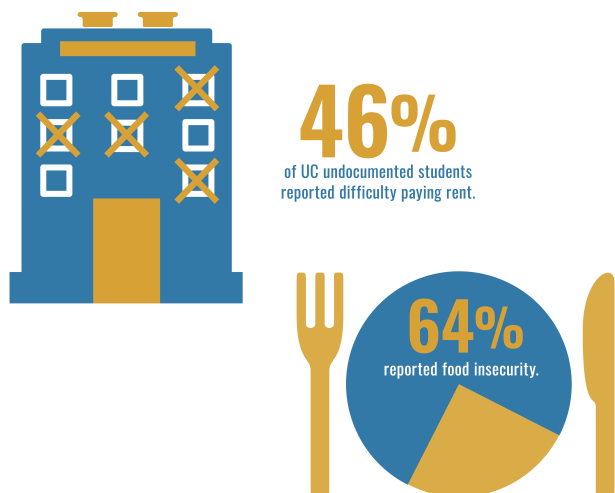
Most students struggled to purchase books and supplies, and pay for housing costs and living expenses. To close their financial aid gaps, close to three in five students reported using personal resources, two in five used family resources, and one in five took out a loan.

Persisting financial need results in high levels of food and housing insecurity among UC undocumented students.

Sixty four percent of survey respondents experienced food insecurity in the past academic year, compared to 42% of the general UC student population (Martinez et al 2016). Amelia explained, “I did have times where I had to limit

what I ate because I didn't have enough money to buy more food. I did have some days where I didn't eat. I did need a little bit more help and I didn't want to ask my parents because at the time I knew they were struggling a lot. And I didn't want them to get worried or anything like that.” Others mentioned skipping meals or limiting what or how much they ate.

Almost half of survey participants described housing insecurity in the past year, with 46% reporting difficulty paying rent, and 41% reporting concerns that they might not have a place to live. Omar explained, “Every semester, I'm worried about where the hell I'm gonna live. And how the hell I'm going to be able to afford paying that. ... It stresses me out.” This was particularly an issue in areas where the university was situated in expensive housing markets.



Some students also indicated that their immigration status created barriers to securing housing. Ester recalled needing to use a social security number to apply for off-campus housing: “I actually had to have my uncle be my [lease co-] signer because they need someone with a social security and he's a citizen.” Not all students had citizen family members willing or able to help them in this way.

Persisting financial need has negative repercussions for undocumented students' academic performance.

Half of survey respondents agreed that their limited financial aid hurts their academic performance. Rebecca shared, “I've had to choose between buying books and buying food. ... I feel like if I don't own a book, that impacts my grades and I feel like I do worse.”

DACA helps undocumented students make ends meet.

Participants who had DACA were able to find employment. Many reported working on campus, easing their ability to get to work and allowing them to close financial gaps. Finding employment was much more difficult for students who did not have DACA, which limited their ability to meet their basic needs. If DACA recipients' employment authorizations expire, their incomes will undoubtedly decrease and/or become inconsistent, creating greater challenges as students try to cover the gaps in their financial aid packages.

Policy Recommendations

- 1. Expand institutional financial aid available to undocumented students.** Publish a list of all programs that are open to undocumented individuals on the undocumented student resource webpage. Advocate for removing immigration status requirements on those programs that are not open to undocumented students.
- 2. Create (additional) resources that address the food and housing insecurity of all students, regardless of immigration status.** Food resources could include food pantries, meal vouchers for on-campus dining establishments, programs to “rescue” food from events across campus to help stock food pantries, or partnering with local nonprofit organizations to provide hot meals on a set schedule. Housing resources could include fee waivers for housing applications, emergency funds for housing needs, or priority access to cheaper on-campus housing options. Consider informal options, such as creating a list of individuals who live near campus and are willing to provide temporary lodging.
- 3. Ensure that there are no unintended barriers or phrasing that leads undocumented students to self-select out of using housing and food security resources.** Encourage undocumented students to use existing resources.
- 4. Develop institutional scholarships or partner with non-profit organizations to develop scholarship or emergency funds.**
- 5. Advocate for state legislation to expand financial aid to undocumented students.**