

# The Importance of Undocumented Student Services

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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](http://www.UndocEquity.com)



Undocumented students face several challenges while pursuing a college education. One such barrier is difficulty accessing institutional resources. Often, they must inquire if their immigration status makes them ineligible for an opportunity or resource, ask for clarification on whether application processes are different for them, or in some situations may have to advocate for additional resources. Undocumented student services staff members help ensure that undocumented students are able to receive accurate information and appropriate resources.

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

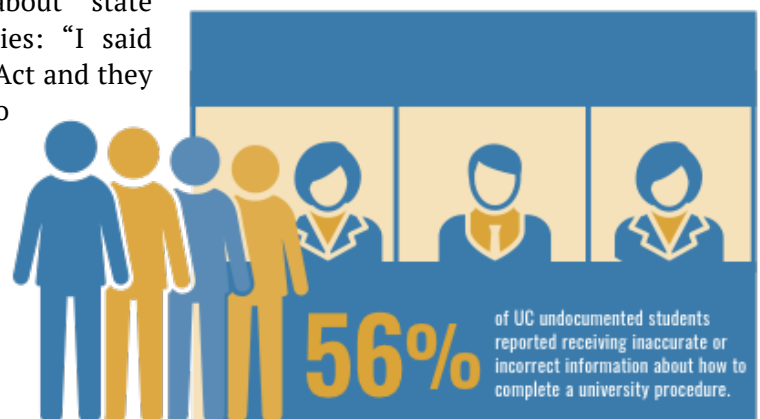
**Many undocumented students are hesitant to reveal their immigration status to others.**

Half of survey participants reported not being open about their immigration status with 39% revealing their status only when necessary and 13% being not at all open; only 19% reported being very open about their immigration status. This hesitancy can make it particularly difficult to access services and support tailored to the unique needs of undocumented students.

**Students frequently encounter staff and faculty that are unaware of undocumented student resources.**

When students revealed their immigration status to staff and faculty, they often received incorrect information: 56% of survey participants reported being given inaccurate or incorrect information about how to complete a university procedure as an undocumented student. Further, 58% reported having to educate a university staff person about their eligibility to receive a resource. For example, Beatrice recounted speaking with a financial aid representative who did not know about state financial aid policies: "I said California DREAM Act and they told me there's no such thing."

Participants reported similar experiences at various offices across campus.



## Undocumented student services staff members prevent misinformation.

Each University of California campus has at least one full-time staff member charged with offering undocumented student services. These staff members assist students by answering questions, guiding them to resources, and providing holistic programming to support their academic, social, emotional, and professional development. They are tasked with identifying remaining gaps in services and developing innovative ways to address remaining barriers. Indeed, 47% of students agreed that having a dedicated undocumented student services staff member on campus has helped them academically.

Undocumented student services staff are also instrumental in improving students' feelings of belonging on campus. For most students, these staff members were the first person they encountered in their education whose specific purpose was to support them. In turn, students felt that the institution cared about their success and that they were valued members of the campus community. Lizabel explained, "I always felt welcome and I always felt like I belonged here, I felt wanted." Although other faculty and staff also established positive connections with undocumented students, undocumented student services staff members stood out as key members of the campus community that positively shaped feelings of belonging.

As a result, 60% of survey participants agreed that the undocumented student services staff member(s) increased their sense of belonging on campus, and 79% agreed that even if they do not go to them often, they feel better knowing they are there if they need them.

## Undocumented student services staff are overburdened by unrealistic workloads.

Many undocumented students reported that other offices frequently redirected them to the undocumented student services office for resources and information. This taught students to rely solely on these undocumented student services staff members. Although coordinators are trained to understand and address the unique needs of this

student population, this overburdens them with unrealistic expectations to develop expertise in all student services areas, including academic, financial, and psychological counseling. Deborah acknowledged the high demand placed on her campus' undocumented student services staff member and the fact that, "she's taking on a lot for just one person." High demand means that some students fall through the cracks. Deborah explained, "I don't want to speak to [the staff member] because she's always very busy. Sometimes I go there and she's not even in the office because she has so many things to do."

## Policy Recommendations

- 1. Develop undocumented student support services.** Hire a student affairs professional staff member to focus on undocumented students. Additional staff members are necessary on campuses with larger undocumented student populations to prevent overburdening. Bring on undergraduate and/or graduate students to assist with programming; frame these as professional development internships, and provide scholarship or fellowship funding.
- 2. Provide up-to-date professional development training to staff across campus.** This will enable all staff to provide students with accurate information, decrease some of the burden on undocumented student services, and increase resource access for students who are hesitant to reveal their status to others. This is different than ally training and should be targeted information to assist staff in successfully serving students in their area of expertise.
- 3. Outline and distribute information about campus resources and best practices.** This should be given to staff, faculty, and teaching assistants so they are prepared to address undocumented students' questions.
- 4. Develop a website with undocumented student resources.** It should include information, resources, and contact information for trained staff members in relevant offices. If security is a concern, sensitive information could be put on a secure site that would require a university login. However, basic information should be publically available so that prospective students have access.