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# America's Children

Each year, more than 65,000 undocumented students graduate from US high schools. Many have postsecondary aspirations, yet few have the financial resources to pursue higher education. And a significant number of undocumented students never know that college is an option. Advocates and resources exist to help undocumented students, yet a great deal more are needed. Many college admission counselors and guidance counselors want to help, yet feel isolated and alone. Current laws and regulations can confound and anger these potential allies, but they need to be understood and changed.

Many of us in the admission and college counseling professions can share a story—"that story"—the one that lingers with you late at night and hits you at the most visceral level. For me, "that story" occurred more than 12 years ago in my first week on the job as an admission counselor. A young woman sat across from me with tears in her eyes as she described working two jobs to help her family while earning straight A's, but feared college, due to her undocumented status, was not a reality. She had done everything her school and her community had asked of her. She was bright; she was resilient; she was kind. Our treatment of her in

break down and eliminate the walls they face. One undocumented student with whom I work recently stated: "undocumented students are everyone's neighbors, baby sitters, students, volunteers. We have dined at America's tables, played with America's sons and daughters, gone to the movies and taken the SAT along side America's children. We, too, are America's children. We, too, are America's future. If we can go to college, we will have even greater ability to give back to this nation we love and we know so well." All of us in the school counseling and college admission professions must ask ourselves: "What do we want for our own

**"...undocumented students are everyone's neighbors, baby sitters, students, volunteers. We have dined at America's tables, played with America's sons and daughters, gone to the movies and taken the SAT along side America's children. We, too, are America's children. We, too, are America's future. If we can go to college, we will have even greater ability to give back to this nation we love and we know so well."**

America's higher education system was anything but compassionate. Her last words to me after her interview ended were: "I know I am going to hit a brick wall, but thank you for stopping to chat with me along the way. I am better than what I am being given."

I suspect collectively we could tell hundreds and thousands of "stories" about undocumented students who face insurmountable barriers to education. If we do not pass along our "best practices" to each other—if we do not support each other, and, yes, if we do not push each other to work harder, then the amazing future contributions of our undocumented students will not unfold. We are not alone in our attempt to assist these students. But we have a lot to do. And it is worth it. Our undocumented students are "better than what they are being given," and we have to help

children?" Undocumented students are America's children and they deserve the same opportunities. We must employ and honor the resilience, strength, courage, intelligence, and compassion we have learned from working with undocumented students by fighting for their inclusion. Our children, America's children, deserve nothing less.



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by Roberto G. Gonzales

# More Than Just Access:

## Undocumented Students Navigating the Postsecondary Terrain

Over the last few years, increasing numbers of undocumented students have made their way through to two- and four-year colleges and universities. The increased matriculation rates of these students have been aided by several processes: 1) increases in unauthorized settlement in the late 1980s and 1990s, dramatically increasing the numbers of undocumented children coming of age in the United States (Gonzales 2007; Massey et al 2002; Passel and Cohn 2009); 2) in-state tuition laws assisting undocumented students in certain states to offset higher out-of-state tuition fees (Olivas 2007; Rincon 2008); and 3) the increase in community efforts by students and counselors, bringing awareness to students and families of their rights to go to college (Gonzales 2008; McGray 2007; Rincon 2008; Seif 2006). However, as the volume of undocumented youth matriculating into colleges and universities increases, on campus new questions arise as to their specific rights.

To be sure, the postsecondary pursuits of undocumented students are met with opportunities and barriers. While they cannot legally work, vote and drive in most states, they can attend school. But, beyond a baseline of rights in K-12 guaranteed by the 14th Amendment<sup>1</sup>, their place in institutions of higher learning is still very unclear. Federal provisions are thin, but do not expressly exclude undocumented students from attending public colleges and universities.<sup>2</sup> Individual states have attempted to make strides in settling the uncertain situation of college attendance by undocumented students. By seeking to decouple education and immigration, some states have opted to provide those who attend and graduate from state high schools with access to the same in-state tuition rates available to other students attending public colleges and universities in their states.<sup>3</sup> Other states have taken the opposite approach by seeking to deny admission to undocumented immigrant students (Gonzales 2009). The vast majority of states, however, simply do not have any state policies with respect to undocumented immigrant students.

However, even when state legislation allows undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition, it does not trump federal law to provide broader legal access to institutions such as the labor market and the electoral system. Also, negating some of the positive effects of in-state tuition allowances are laws restricting undocumented students from competing for federal financial aid. Within the confines of the university, many questions remain about

its reach. While in-state tuition laws have increased educational access in some states (Flores 2009; Kaushal 2008) they do not address broader rights on campus. Moreover, eligibility requirements place students in more direct contact with university officials, where uncertainty falls to the discretion of individuals and administrative units. Further, the circumstances of undocumented students in all states engender greater and continued needs on campus, and increased contact with offices that may or may not have answers about their participation. As a result, undocumented students in institutions of higher learning are often left with more questions than answers.

### Undocumented Students Navigating The Postsecondary Terrain

This article lays out some of the structural barriers that exist for undocumented students negotiating postsecondary options, and examines the range of services offered on campus that 1) are clearly off-limits to undocumented students; 2) still provide little clarity as to whether or not undocumented students can participate; and 3) are available to these students.

There are several clearly stated policies at the government and institutional levels to which both students and administrators can refer to when determining eligibility for services. There are also, however, a number of programs and courses of study for students that challenge the already unclear intersection between education policy and immigration law. Moving towards greater clarity will help us to achieve greater levels of inclusion.

<sup>1</sup> In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that undocumented children are “persons” under the Constitution and thus entitled to equal protection under the law according to the 14th Amendment. The court held that states therefore may not discriminate against them on the basis of their legal status in the provision of public elementary and secondary education (Olivas 2005 1986). As a result of the *Plyler* decision, almost all undocumented children attend elementary school, and tens of thousands of undocumented students manage to graduate from high school each year (Passel 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Federal law does not expressly prohibit the admission of undocumented immigrants to US colleges and universities. In contrast to employment law, no federal statutes require disclosure and proof of immigration status and citizenship in order for students to enter higher education.

<sup>3</sup> Since 2001, Texas, California, Utah, Washington, New York, Oklahoma, Illinois, Kansas, New Mexico, and Nebraska and Wisconsin have passed laws permitting certain undocumented students who have attended and graduated from their primary and secondary schools to pay in-state tuition at public institutions of higher education.

### The Constraints of Undocumented Life

Before turning to specific policies at the institutional level that shape the postsecondary experiences of undocumented students, it is important to first examine the everyday barriers that structure their lives on and off campus. The circumstances of adult life present several constraints in making the most of their years in college. Among several factors, family circumstances and the general legal terrain pose both practical limitations and legal barriers.

Most undocumented students live in households where at least one parent is undocumented (Chavez 1998; Passel and Cohn 2009). Further, the vast majority lives in poverty.<sup>4</sup> As a result, their families struggle economically, and children often bear more than their fair share of the burden. Because of limited economic resources, most of these families cannot afford to contribute financially to their children's education. This leaves students on their own to come up with enough funds to cover tuition and other associated costs. Moreover, the college pursuits of the children often produce tensions within households that cannot afford to have family members not contributing. Many undocumented students with whom I have spoken have responsibilities to take care of younger siblings, translate for their parents and contribute financially to the household. These responsibilities, however, pull students away from educational pursuits.

Additionally, legal limitations force undocumented students into a narrow range of options, and in pursuit of less than ideal alternatives. Among significant legal barriers, are obtaining a driver's license (in most states) and a work permit. Certainly working requires legal authorization and in most states, obtaining a driver's license is contingent upon legal residence. These important markers of adulthood generally signal the onset of a new set of roles and responsibilities for young adults. The inability to work severely restricts students' ability to generate money for college. And not being able to drive forces students to make other arrangements, such as finding rides from friends and relying on public modes of transportation. In cities with comprehensive public transit systems, this is a feasible option. However, in smaller towns or large cities with less extensive transit systems, this option severely impinges on already restricted free time. Many students in Southern California, for example, spend three to four hours a day commuting by bus.

Taken together, these barriers conspire to limit time spent on campus. When family need takes time away from educational pursuits and legal restrictions require students to make less

time-efficient choices, there is a trade off that is made that often involves less than ideal levels of time on campus to enjoy the benefits of the university experience, meet with professors during office hours and join peers in class-based study groups. While it may be argued that many poor and working students confront similar circumstances, it is difficult to dispute the reality that immigrant status constraints erect considerable barriers for undocumented students. Once on campus, however, these barriers multiply.

### Legal Restrictions

Immigration restrictions push undocumented students into a narrowly circumscribed range of possibilities on campus. Not only are they limited in terms of financial assistance, but they are also restricted from receiving crucial supports tailored to meet the needs of low-income students. The exclusion from these important supports severely constricts opportunities for successful postsecondary experiences.

Perhaps the biggest structural barrier to a successful postsecondary experience is financial. As has already been mentioned, federal immigration laws prohibit undocumented students from receiving any form of federal student aid. And, with the exception of a couple of states<sup>5</sup>, these students are also not eligible for any state aid. Without financial aid, meeting the costs of a public university becomes extremely difficult. While there are a limited number of available scholarships and some aid at a handful of private colleges, scholarships are too few and tuition at private schools is often much higher than at public universities.

The inability to apply for financial aid is, indeed, prohibitive. Without financial assistance, it is extremely difficult for most Americans to afford a public university. Given the socioeconomic profile of most immigrant families, the cost of college is daunting if not out-of-reach for undocumented students. An estimated two-thirds of all full-time college students receive some form of grant aid. In 2007-08, undergraduate students received an average of \$8,896 per full-time equivalent (FTE) student in financial aid, including \$4,656 in grant aid and \$3,650 in federal loans.<sup>6</sup> When one considers that a very large proportion of students in the United States receive some form of financial aid, it is not difficult to imagine how restricted access to financial aid stalls, diverts and derails educational pursuits.

Beyond the restricted access to financial aid, undocumented students cannot participate in a host of federally-funded programs

<sup>4</sup> Nearly 40 percent of undocumented children live below the federal poverty level (compared to 17 percent of native-born children), while the average income of undocumented immigrant families is 40 percent lower than that of either native-born families or legal immigrant families. Jeffrey S. Passel, *Unauthorized Migrants: Numbers and Characteristics* (Washington, DC: The Pew Hispanic Center, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Texas, New Mexico and Oklahoma have passed stage legislation allowing undocumented students to compete for state aid. In 2007, Oklahoma rescinded its in-state tuition and financial aid benefits to undocumented students.

<sup>6</sup> See The College Board, *Trends in College Pricing 2009; Trends in Student Aid 2008; and Education Pays 2007*.

Taken together, the inability to receive financial aid, exclusion from important federally-funded sources of support, and restriction from any form of work study, tremendously limit on-campus options for financial, social and academic support.

designed to assist low-income students. Among these programs, TRIO programs (initially just three programs) are perhaps the most critical to low-income and first-generation college students. In 1965, under Title IV of the Higher Education Act, Congress established TRIO to assist in the matriculation, retention and graduation of low-income students. Today, these educational opportunity outreach programs serve and assist more than a million low-income, first-generation students. Because TRIO receives federal funds, undocumented students are not entitled to participate. Practically, this means that several outreach programs that provide services critical to low-income and first-generation university students, such as academic support assistance, skills-building and research opportunities, are off-the-table for undocumented students.

Additionally, immigration laws prohibit undocumented students from activities such as study abroad programs that entail travel outside the country, and any paid internships or student employment. Taken together, the inability to receive financial aid, exclusion from important federally-funded sources of support, and restriction from any form of work study, tremendously limit on-campus options for financial, social and academic support. Coupled with low family income, high family need and the inability to engage in most means towards earning money, undocumented students find the road through higher education to be an increasingly narrow pathway.

**Gray Areas of Participation**

Beyond legal exclusions, there are also programs and services for which there are no definitive answers as to whether or not undocumented students can participate. This ambiguity often leads to de facto exclusion. Much of the confusion can be attributed to a lack of clear guidelines at multiple levels as to the spectrum of rights of undocumented students. While there are clearly stated policies to which both students and administrators can refer when trying to determine eligibility for services, there are many programs and courses of study for students that challenge the already unclear intersection between education policy and immigration law, often because until now there have been no precedents. Much of the gray area exists in programs that require licensing and certification.

Due to the timing of growing numbers of undocumented youth coming of age at a time when in-state tuition laws have now been on the books for the last eight years, increasing numbers of undocumented students are making their way through college and thinking about their futures. However, because there has yet to be a federal solution to their paradoxical circumstances, very few options exist after college. As a result, many students find the further pursuit of education a legally available, albeit financially tenuous, choice that allows them to buy time and build human capital and experience while they wait. For many American-born students thinking about employment options, advanced degrees are necessary for securing well-paying jobs. Similarly, for many undocumented students, moving on to graduate and professional programs is the logical next step along their educational trajectory. However, many pathways to post-baccalaureate education and training are blurred by legal uncertainty. As greater numbers of undocumented students receive four-year degrees and make strides to continue their education exploring these gray areas becomes increasingly more important.

Many universities offer professional programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels that allow students the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in their professions while earning important credentials. Students often have the opportunity to begin these programs during their undergraduate studies and continue them after the completion of the bachelor's degree. Such allowances provide students the means through which to gain experience and to get a head start on certain requirements. However, because many of these programs include a direct service component (in the classroom or the hospital), they require a background check with fingerprints. Many of these also require students to successfully pass a state exam.

In his interaction with undocumented students over the last few years, the author has met students who have been denied access to these programs, and others who have found their way into and through some of the very programs to which others have been denied. Most administrators of these programs generally err on the side of caution. Many of them point to the inability to obtain

a license or pass state exams at the end of these programs, or to the reality that pursuing these programs offers no change in students' legal circumstances. Others give examples of legal barriers such as background checks and requirements for state-issued forms of identification as the rationale for dissuading students.

However, I have met scores of students pursuing teaching credentials, nursing certification and law degrees. These students discovered on their own that there was no official stipulation that entry into such programs would be denied if a person does not have a Social Security number. They were able to successfully complete background checks and enroll in and pass entrance and state exams. While many online forms of registration cannot be completed without a Social Security number, students can submit paper versions via mail and when being processed for fingerprinting. In doing so, students substitute their countries' Consular Identification cards for the State ID, and Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs) for Social Security numbers.

Because there is no consensus on institutional policy for participation in credential and licensing programs, many undocumented students are denied or discouraged from applying. However, federal law does not expressly forbid undocumented students from participating, and there are growing numbers of precedents throughout the country. In the next few years, it will be incumbent for universities to provide more clarity and direction to undocumented students with regard to their ability to participate.

#### **A Baseline of Permissible Pursuits**

Because of the numerous exclusions and gray areas, it is important for campuses to take inventory of existing possibilities and available resources for undocumented students pursuing higher education. Certainly, once on campus, undocumented students are entitled to take classes, receive academic counseling and a baseline of services that is provided to the general student body. Also, while I have observed students being initially denied entry to placement tests (e.g., in math and languages), most colleges and universities have provided guidance about alternative forms of identification to those proctoring exams.

Beyond instruction, social and academic support is in great need among students who do not have in their immediate family networks, members who have gone through college and are able to chart a path for them. While federally-funded programs are off-limits, student affairs and academic counseling offices are generally available to undocumented students on their campus. As students of the university, undocumented students are often viewed as "automatic clients" (Marrow 2009), and part of an overall student population to be served. Moreover, be-

cause of their special financial and legal circumstances, many student support services staff view them as members of a vulnerable population in need of services.

While financing postsecondary education is made difficult by restrictions on federal and state aid, a host of private scholarships are available. Generally, most American students finance their education through a combination of government-funded financial aid and private scholarships. Because of their exclusion from the former, undocumented students must thoroughly search out existing private scholarships—both local and national—that do not require US citizenship as a requirement for receipt. This requires students to spend extra hours in their search. Some national organizations, however, have provided assistance by consolidating listings of scholarships. National organizations such as Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), as well as local ethnic and community organizations, regularly compile and distribute lists of scholarships that do not have such restrictions.

Beyond existing scholarships, students have found support through local institutions and individual sponsors. Community institutions are easing some of the financial burden for undocumented students and their families by providing generally smaller, yet crucially needed, sums of money to help offset tuition costs or to pay for books and other expenses. Additionally, many undocumented students have found useful existing networks of school, or community-based mentors to provide scholarships and also ongoing social support and guidance to help them through their years at the university.

#### **Conclusions**

Until now the debate concerning undocumented students and postsecondary education has largely been a question of access. To be sure, these debates continue. States, public higher education systems, and individual institutions debate whether undocumented students should be allowed to attend colleges and universities, while other states consider in-state tuition and state financial aid options. While broader access to higher education is critical, it is only part of the puzzle, as issues of access do not provide adequate answers to questions regarding the experiences of undocumented students within colleges and universities, and whether or not they are receiving sufficient levels of service to be able to persist and graduate. Demographic clues suggest that increasing numbers of undocumented students are entering two- and four-year institutions of higher learning. But how are undocumented students experiencing postsecondary pursuits? And how do colleges and universities smooth or stall their advancement towards graduation and post-baccalaureate programs?

Currently, the postsecondary pursuits of undocumented students are severely constricted due to exclusion from federal financial aid and important support programs and ambiguity in public and institutional guidelines for participation.

Currently, the postsecondary pursuits of undocumented students are severely constricted due to exclusion from federal financial aid and important support programs and ambiguity in public and institutional guidelines for participation. Restriction from the receipt of financial aid not only serves as an initial barrier to matriculation, but also an ongoing source of stress and worry as undocumented students attempt to pursue postsecondary education. Equally debilitating is the inability to receive crucial support services on campus. Federal financial aid and social and academic support services were initiated to level the playing field by assisting disadvantaged student populations to be successful on college campuses. Being shut out of these important supports is tantamount to starting the race many steps behind the starting line and with cement blocks around one's feet. But beyond these exclusions, undocumented students are confronted with a number of dead ends and barriers. While some opportunities require federal permission (i.e., to work or leave the country), others require the admittance by key gatekeepers on campus.

As increasingly more undocumented students matriculate into our colleges and universities, it is incumbent upon these institutions to take stock of their various rights on campus and provide staff with appropriate guidelines and training to promote awareness and cooperation so students can receive assistance with and entry into permissible services, programs and courses of study on campus. Further, it is not helpful to students or universities to have uncertainty and ambiguity in policies. Therefore, campuses must move towards clarity by working with state and federal entities to resolve any legal uncertainties that have emerged with certification and licensing programs and provide clear and accessible guidelines for participation.

As our country wrestles with issues of postsecondary access for undocumented students, we must draw a larger circle and ask about the range and quality of educational opportunities for these students on campus.



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By Dawn Anderson and Marty Blum

# Is Higher Education Out of Reach

## for Qualified Undocumented Students?

**Maria\***, born in El Salvador, arrived in the United States when she was seven, after a grueling journey. The difficulties of her illegal entry into the country is a story for another time. This is the story of Maria's efforts now, at age 18, to grasp the American dream of a college education.

Though she is from a low-income household and neither parent went to college, Maria completed rigorous college prep coursework, including numerous AP and honors courses, and knew how to apply to college thanks largely to the programs of Marin Education Fund, whose mission includes increasing college access for underserved communities. Accepted to the University of California at Santa Barbara, Maria began classes in September, thanks to an array of scholarships from private and public sources.

Those "public" sources cut to the heart of the matter. As a high school senior Maria obtained US citizenship. Because Maria is now a citizen, she is eligible for up to \$13,000 in federal and state grants, as well as scholarships from the University of California.

Now consider the case of Carolina\*, who was born in Mexico and arrived in Marin County at age two. Carolina is a graduate of San Rafael High School, where she chose to participate in the Engineering Academy curriculum. Carolina is well-qualified for a four-year college, but because she is AB-540\*\*—an arcane status that permits students in California, regardless of their residency, to pay in-state tuition fees but not receive federal or state aid—her only option is to live at home and attend the local junior college. Even that is touch and go, because her financial aid award package is a \$5,000 private scholarship. The likelihood of Carolina actually transferring schools and finishing a four-year degree is very low, based on statistics from similar populations.

Two girls, the same age, personal history more similar than not, yet one will probably become a college graduate and the other will not. Both consider our country their home and intend to stay and raise families here. Due to her AB-540 status, Carolina, if she cannot overcome the crushing financial obstacles to a college degree, will be robbed of the opportunity to fulfill her dreams, while Maria will be granted the opportunity to reach her potential, pass on to her children the cultural capital of how to become college-educated, and be part of the educated work force California needs.

Despite her desperate situation, Carolina is better off than students in many other states because California is one of the few states that allow students to pay in-state tuition at its public colleges and universities. Though eligible for in-state tuition, undocumented students are not eligible to apply for financial aid from the state of California or the federal government. This barrier alone makes the dream of going to college unobtainable for most.

Steadily growing, the population of undocumented immigrants has increased 40 percent over recent years. The undocumented popula-

tion has reached four percent of the total US population, or 12 million residents. It is estimated that about one in every six undocumented residents, or 1.8 million, is under age 18. Twenty-four percent of the total US undocumented population lives in California. (Passel 2005)

With so few resources currently available to undocumented students, more funding is clearly necessary for college to be viable for many students who are technically illegal or caught in the half-world of AB-540. Until meaningful legislative reform is enacted, it will be up to dedicated individuals and private organizations to bring college within reach for this growing segment of our country's population.

One such student, Daniel\*, says, "I am glad someone is writing about undocumented students because I think there are a lot of things that need to be said. If I were able to give advice to representatives of colleges and universities, I would tell them to develop close relationships with undocumented students, become informed about their problems, and be willing to spend extra time to help them. I was able to push through and make it to college because I was lucky to have people around me who were accessible, aware of my problems and available to support me during the process." Daniel began his sophomore year at San Francisco State University in September.

At Marin Education Fund, we serve many students like Daniel, with some heartening successes. For now, the successes are still too few.

\*Names have been changed to protect privacy.

\*\*AB-540 requirements stipulate that a student must attend a California high school for three or more years; graduate from a California high school or its equivalent (GED); and file an affidavit with the state college or university stating that he/she will apply for legal residency as soon as he/she is able to do so.



**DAWN ANDERSON** is the director of programs and **MARTY BLUM** is the director of development at Marin Education Fund (CA). Marin Education Fund has been recognized as a national model for its work in assisting low-income and first-generation college students. Since its founding in 1981, Marin Education Fund has distributed over 30,000 scholarships totaling more than \$38 million to low-income students, regardless of their immigration status.



by Jennifer Marie Godinez and Alondra Espejel

# The Minnesota Immigrant College Access Movement:

## History, Policy and Recommendations to Admission Counselors

*“My name is Jessy, I recently heard about you from Isabel from the Girls Scouts about the help that you offer young Latinos that wish to go to college but don’t have the legal status. I myself am found in that situation, I really have high hopes for myself and I wish to attend college to be in the business industry someday. As we all know you need college to have more knowledge and to learn more things that I still have not had the chance to look at. I was brought to this country and I’m thankful for it, I just wish this can happen for me, to accomplish my American dream. I know this country gives out so many opportunities, I just hope it can give me this one. I would love to hear back from you! I hope you can take some time and help me with my situation.” (Student email to article author, September 2009)*

Children with high aspirations, high academic standards for themselves and their peers are denied access to higher education because a lack of policy reform and education practice reform in the United States of America. We, the people, are actually witnessing active, systemic inequality before our very eyes. The deep injustice of denying talented youth access to higher education has motivated us and many others in our communities to push for legal reforms and education practices reforms.

This article is an update on the social movement that has transpired in Minnesota for greater access to higher education for more immigrant youth. Discussing this movement in Minnesota is key, given that most of the attention has been focused on Texas and California. Minnesota has been experiencing rapid demographic shifts and particular growth with immigrant populations. (Fennelly and Huart 2009) The Latino population is projected to become the largest minority in the state within the next 10 years. (Peterson 2009) Immigration shifts and an increasing Latino population in this Midwestern state are bringing about historic changes—and challenges—in the overall US access to higher education movement.

College admission counselors must know that “new workforce” and “new community” are terms for immigrant families and immigrant youth. This demographic change will mean a necessary shift in education practice. College campuses must learn to adapt to the experiences, needs and talents of Latino, Somali, Hmong and Ethiopian students. There are some critical questions we must ask ourselves in college recruitment practices. If more than 10

percent of Minnesota children are excelling as bilingual navigators (compared to five percent in 1990) (Children’s Defense Fund of Minnesota 2002): what does this mean for the changing face of admission policies? What does this mean for college recruitment strategies?

In addition to highlighting important historical moments in the access to higher education movement in Minnesota, this article also presents key recommendations for changes in admission practices from the perspectives of students and advocates in the movement. These students and advocates believe that following these new practices will help each admission counselor meet the equity and excellence goals set forth by their institutions.

### College Admission in a Global Reality

As college admission counselors, it is important to recognize the global, racial and economic context in which the issue of access to higher education for immigrant and undocumented youth<sup>1</sup> has surfaced. Minnesota’s global reality is clearly apparent when one acknowledges that the ways in which Latino and immigrant business owners are contributing to Minnesota cities, such as the \$2 million annual taxes, payroll and other expenses that the city of Richfield receives from immigrant business owners. (Almirall 2004) From this point of view, the influx of immigrant community members into our schools, churches and neighborhoods is a collective economic asset—they are the people who are making economic contributions and building the state’s future prosperity. State economist Tom Stinson observes that “wherever they [immigrants]

<sup>1</sup> The term “undocumented” is used to refer to students who do not have a student visa or US residency/citizenship status.

grants] come from, it's going to be important for Minnesotans to focus on making sure that we make the fullest use of the skills of that new workforce." (Baier 2008) Stinson continues by explaining that Minnesota's competitive advantage is tied to the quality of life and equality in opportunities that our new community members and our new workforce are allowed to achieve. (Stinson and Gillaspay 2008) However, researchers and advocates assert that reaping the rewards of the economic benefits being generated by these immigrant families and youth must be connected to advancing this community's human rights, labor rights and educational access. (Fennelly and Huart 2009) "Primary among these are state sponsored efforts to improve the high school graduation rates for immigrant youth, and employer-sponsored programs that insure opportunities for job training and advancement," according to Professor Katherine Fennelly (Fennelly and Huart 2009).

To quote Alejandra, one of the students who provided recommendations for this essay, college admission counselors must "help ensure that students are prepared to become the next generation of leaders, professionals, parents, workers and citizens."

This article may serve as a tool to help admission counselors meet these community-based expectations and help build the capacity of college admission offices to recruit and admit more immigrant, undocumented and Latino youth—a move that is necessitated by our society's evolving demographics. In order to prepare more college admission counselors to become advocates of equal access to higher education and to lead college campus efforts for global inclusion, we must learn about the challenges and solutions that have been crafted by these very students. What follows are updates on policy changes intended to support more immigrant youth to access a college degree, ending with recommendations to help support more undocumented students to enter a college campus.

### 10 Years in the Making: Immigrant Youth Secure Policy Changes for Access to Higher Education

Beginning in 1999, advocates of Latino youth at community-based organizations such as La Escuelita and El Colegio began raising the question of access to education for undocumented immigrant youth. It became more and more apparent that one of the most significant barriers in accessing higher education was the immigration status of students. The students themselves were motivated about education beyond high school, but the limits put on them by a broken immigration system and unclear "rules" for the use of status in higher education admission, created barriers and deterred them from pursuing a higher education. In 2001 a "call to action" meeting with various partners took place at a local university. Student testimonies were shared and community members discussed strategies to address this need. Through those ef-

forts advocates connected to Minnesota Representative Carlos Mariani, who then became one of the main authors of what is now known as the Minnesota Dream Act.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, local educators and immigrant entrepreneurs were developing plans for a Latino scholarship fund that would be supported by immigrant business owners and aimed at supporting immigrant youth that lacked access to state grants and federal financial aid.

As awareness grew about the issue of undocumented students and the lack of access to higher education, so grew the energy and power of the immigrant rights movement. In 2004 and based on the energy of the National Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, a core group of immigrant strategists began to lay the foundations of what today is known as the Minnesota Immigrant Freedom Network (MIFN)—a statewide immigrant integration group focusing on access to higher education for immigrant youth and community organizing. As more and more youth became involved in MIFN's unique "Yes I Can Dream!" curriculum, the movement for college access grew in size, matured in coordination and became stronger. One of the lessons in the curriculum includes an invitation for any youth to attend Student Day at the Capitol—a college access day which MIFN hosts in St. Paul. This day began with only a few dozen participants in 2004 and has now been attended by more than a thousand youth and allies in 2009. It is through this energy and mobilization that \$4.8 million have been secured over the past four years to help undocumented immigrant students gain access to a college education. In 2008 when the MNSCU Chancellor's office analyzed the impact of this access policy on their student enrollment rates they found that 3,540 students took advantage of the flat tuition at 11 colleges; 2,840 of those were immigrant students. These are the types of policy changes and immigrant education access issues that college admission counselors should be aware of and advocate for.

### Immigrant Youth Provide Recommendations to Admission Counselors

While a large movement of access to higher education has transpired from the efforts of youth, advocates, community members, educators, and community organizations—accessing higher education also requires the active role of the admission counselor. To gain a sense of the best role admission counselors can play in access to higher education, it is important to hear from the experts—the youth themselves.

The youth that were asked to participate in writing this article are from the college access movement described previously. The students featured in this essay have trained younger students on the admission process, have assisted admission counselors in information sessions with immigrant families, and have raised

<sup>2</sup> The Minnesota Dream Act was a legislative proposal that would recognize undocumented students as residents for tuition purposes if they met the following requirements: graduated from a Minnesota high school, lived in the state for more than three years, and agreed to sign an affidavit with their college stating they were actively seeking to regularize their immigration status. The Minnesota Dream Act is not an acronym and is very different in scope than the federal DREAM Act, which is a federal proposal that would give undocumented students a path to citizenship if they enroll in college or the US military.

Understanding demographic shifts of your local community, historical gains in the policy sector by immigrant youth, and the youth recommendations as described above are tools admission counselors can use to enhance their recruitment strategies of immigrant youth to their institutions.

scholarship money for immigrant youth. Additionally, the authors of this article encourage admission offices nationwide to contact local immigrant youth groups or organizations serving immigrant families, to develop effective strategies. Here are the expert student voices:

#### *Hugo*

“I would ask a counselor to find out more personal information and talk to the student to see in what kind of way they can help and provide support. It’s more like building a counselor/student relationship; just enough so the counselor knows what he or she is trying to achieve and what kind of obstacles they face. Also, to be aware of what kind of resources can help a student such as federal, government and local foundations that can help financially. In my opinion, one of the best ways a counselor can help is by showing a student support because it gives him hope for the future. In my experience, my counselor Charlotte at Century College (MN) is and was very helpful to me. The first time I met her, she was able to give me advice on which classes I needed to take first. She said it didn’t matter what kind of class to take first, since my required ones were closed. I was enrolled and went from there. She also helped me to apply for this Century financial application and walked me through it step by step. Currently, she is helping me develop an academic plan for a mentor project. I find this is very supportive and inspirational. I am also very thankful for my counselor at City Academy High School (MN) because she paid for my first tuition at Century College. When I thought I wasn’t able to pay before the deadline, all of these little or big issues not only give me hope but give me the strength to pursue my educational goals.”

#### *Denise*

“I think college admission counselors need to show that it is possible to get a higher education. Sometimes they give the sense that only people with ‘papers’ can go to college. They need to show that there are ways to get to college, even if it’s harder for immigrant students to attend, it is still possible. Many students believe that they can’t apply for scholarships because they don’t have a Social Security number, this is why admission counselors should show undocumented students a list of scholarships that are available to them or offer other ways students can get money. Also, counselors need to walk us through the application process to show us

what we should fill out when students apply for college. For example, should they mark the box that says citizen, resident or simply leave it blank? Many students don’t know what box they need to check during this application process.”

#### *Alejandra*

“My advice to counselors is to help ensure that students are prepared to become the next generation of leaders, professionals, parents, workers and citizens. Every student needs guidance, support and expanding opportunities, so counselors must build stronger and closer relationships with students and their parents. They need to make an effort to learn more about our culture and provide all students with the knowledge and skills appropriate for our developmental level by designing, enhancing and implementing a comprehensive bilingual counseling program that promotes and improves student success. It would be a great idea to have a ninth-12th grade booklet with all the requirements students need to achieve each grade. It is significant that parents understand terms like GPA and how students obtain credits and how many they need in order for them to graduate from high school. It is vital for Latino students and their parents to have a better understanding on how the counseling program works, so parents can support their kids better and students identify their goals and work hard to achieve them. Counselors must also learn more about undocumented student opportunities out there, so they can best help fulfill undocumented Latino students’ interests. They should get involved in events that promote and give tools to work with the Latino community, so they have a better understanding about our culture. And most important, counselors should get involved to help students dream about their future and guide them through the journey and the struggle many undocumented, immigrant and Chicano students face and help them overcome the obstacles out there not only to graduate from high school, but to pursue a higher education.”

Understanding demographic shifts of your local community, historical gains in the policy sector by immigrant youth, and the youth recommendations as described above are tools admission counselors can use to enhance their recruitment strategies of immigrant youth to their institutions. The following framework synthesizes the authors’ and youths experiences in a hands-on format.

Working with Immigrant Students: An Admissions Counselor Framework

Student Themes:	Potential Solutions:
Develop a welcoming environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language we use with immigrant families matters—stay positive and encouraging throughout the process.</li> <li>• “Admission Nights” with immigrant youth groups can assist in building relationships with students. Ask current college students to assist with these information sessions.</li> </ul>
Review the application process (with a focus on key questions for immigrant youth), academic criteria and course selection requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not assume that students understand each of the steps to admission. Review these steps in detail, meet with the student, and focus on any deadlines or requirements that are vital to these students’ success.</li> </ul>
Specifically review the financial aid options for immigrant youth—scholarship information is key.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scholarship lists for undocumented youth are increasingly available through various education networks. We recommend visiting <a href="http://www.mncollegeaccess.org">www.mncollegeaccess.org</a> to download a copy of compiled information.</li> </ul>
Develop trainings for your office so that information is not held with just one staff, but becomes a systemic effort in changing the culture of the admission office to become more accessible to all youth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take an assessment of accessibility listed here: <a href="http://groups.google.com/group/immigrant-freedom-network/files">http://groups.google.com/group/immigrant-freedom-network/files</a></li> <li>• This tool can guide your office to address key issues in preparing all admission counselors to work with all students effectively.</li> </ul>



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By Aliza Gilbert

# Quest for Education

It never fails that every time I give the presentation *Undocumented Students and Their Quest for Higher Education* colleagues say they are not coming to hear me because, while they are sure my presentation will be wonderful, they have no undocumented students in their school. Skip ahead a few months and invariably one or more of them will call and sheepishly leave a message which starts with, “I have an undocumented student and I don’t know what to do.” Counseling professionals who work regularly with this population know that these students now exist in almost all of our high schools but many of them fly under the radar. Some hide out of fear and others from embarrassment. This is something that must change. If we are to help undocumented students navigate the complex process of researching and applying to college we must reach out to them and let them know that not only is college an option but that there are individuals who can help guide them through the process.

## What can high schools and community-based organizations do?

### Improve identification and outreach.

Counselors often trip over the first question: how does one know whether a student is undocumented? When I began working with these kids 10 years ago I began to notice some patterns. Many were smart kids with poor grades and bad attitudes about school. Others were students with great grades who never engaged in the college process. Couple either one of these descriptions with a student without a Social Security number and a birth place outside of the US and you have a potential undocumented student. Many students will open up when a counselor reaches out to them one-on-one. It might take a few years for students to develop trust in their counselor (remember these are kids who have spent most of their life hiding their status) but it will happen. Other students are also a wonderful resource. Occasionally, I have students who will not come forward but I have learned that if I gently ask other undocumented students who else should be on my radar, I end up with some additional names. Lastly, teachers and social workers should also be included on your target list. At my school they know the scoop on a student long before I do. Most are very protective of their students’ privacy but if they know you can help and are to be trusted, the beans will spill.

### Change the language used in presentations.

Even with the best outreach, you will still miss students. And, because I believe that we have a responsibility to help all students in our communities, not just those within our school, when I talk about who is eligible to attend college I use the words citizen, permanent resident and undocumented student. It has become part of my regular vernacular. Not only does it let any undocumented student in my presentation know that I am aware of their existence but even if every student in my audience is a citizen or permanent resident, I can pretty much guarantee that at least one of them knows someone who is not. The undocumented commu-

nity is close knit and word travels fast. Sometimes, what travels is incorrect and that is why we must make sure that we are sharing the right message. We have to dispel the myth that undocumented students cannot attend college.

### Get to the freshmen early.

Too often undocumented students think that they cannot attend college and therefore see little value in a high school education. As a result, their attendance and, subsequently, their academic performance are sometimes poor. Because undocumented students are not eligible for federal and state aid (unless they are lucky enough to live in one of the few states that makes aid available to them) merit scholarships are crucial. However, it is difficult to improve upon a poor grade point average after two or three years in high school. Each year I meet with a number of juniors who tell me they just learned they could attend college (clearly we are not doing enough outreach) and they want to know about scholarships. It is heartbreaking to tell these students that their low GPA makes them ineligible for almost all scholarships. When talking to freshmen about the importance of GPA in college admission and how GPA is calculated, one should be sure to specifically include a reference to undocumented students. You might be surprised who takes notice.

### Inform students and parents about tuition costs and payment options.

Many parents are completely unaware of not only the varying costs of college but also how tuition can be paid. We need to spend time each fall talking with all families about the costs of attending college part time as well as the tuition differences at community college, a state university, as well as a private university. Conversations about payment also need to include payment options. Parents often do not know that the tuition bill for the year does not need to be paid on the first day of school, nor do most know of the payment plan option that many schools are now offering. Most

families cannot afford to pay thousands of dollars each August but many of them can afford a few hundred each month.

#### **Affirm that an education is worthwhile.**

I encountered my first undocumented student when I was working on the admission side and we admitted and partially funded a student from the high school where I now work. Even though he received a generous financial aid package the family was required to pay what for them was an incredibly large sum of money. I struggled with whether we were doing what was in the best interest of the student. Would he spend four years at college, graduate and then be unable to work? The answer then was maybe. The answer is still maybe, but I no longer wrestle with this. I have seen undocumented students go on to open their own businesses, take jobs abroad and some times even return to their country of birth. I have seen others alter their status through employment or marriage. Most, however, are still not

#### **Educate admission staff.**

Many admission professionals are misinformed regarding their institution's admission policies for undocumented students. Most incorrectly assume that they cannot admit undocumented students. No federal law prohibits colleges from admitting undocumented students. There are state laws and institutional policies but no federal laws. Make sure that your admission staff knows the policies of your institution in regard to both admission and funding. It takes just one person to crush the dreams that others have worked so hard to nurture. Ideally, each admission office should have at least one person who is knowledgeable about the special circumstances of these students and that individual would be the contact person for students and counselors.

#### **Provide merit scholarships and privately funded institutional aid.**

Many institutions offer merit scholarships and grant aid to international students but not to undocumented students. I beg colleges

**Make sure that your admission staff knows the policies of your institution in regard to both admission and funding. It takes just one person to crush the dreams that others have worked so hard to nurture. Ideally, each admission office should have at least one person who is knowledgeable about the special circumstances of these students and that individual would be the contact person for students and counselors.**

documented and many are not employed in their field of study. However, I believe the value of an education extends far beyond simply getting a job. An education makes for a richer life by fostering a greater understanding of the world and helps one become a global citizen. Many undocumented college graduates will return to their communities as role models, inspiring others to pursue an education. To quote the United Negro College Fund, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

#### **What can colleges do?**

##### **Revise the application for admission.**

Make providing a Social Security number optional (a number of colleges have begun doing this already) and create an option under citizenship that says, non-citizen or other. Too many students give up on applications when they see questions they cannot answer. Not only will this help eliminate that but it also subtly tells undocumented students that they are welcome at your institution. Make sure that students can submit an online application if they leave the request for Social Security number blank, or if they use zeros. Too often they will complete an online application only to find that it cannot be submitted without a valid Social Security number or a checked box describing their citizenship status.

to rethink this policy. Many of these students are academic rock stars and leaders both within their school and community. They can and will contribute to a college campus. Rethink your financial aid policies if undocumented students are required to complete a paper FAFSA. We know that these students cannot submit a FAFSA and completing a paper version understandably makes them nervous. In addition, a majority of the questions on the FAFSA are not relevant. Think about creating a simpler institutional form that can be used to determine aid eligibility.



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