

Dreams Deferred and Dreams Denied

Undocumented students need both access and services to succeed—and often, they get neither.

By Daysi Díaz-Strong, Christina Gómez, María E. Luna-Duarte, and Erica R. Meiners

Luz came to the United States from Mexico at eleven months old with her mother. She graduated from a suburban Chicago high school in 2007 with an ACT score of 29 (out of a possible 36). Accepted by all four universities to which she applied, she selected a private college in Chicago that offered her a generous scholarship. Even with the scholarship, however, Luz had to leave the college after one semester for a much more affordable community college.

Luz is one of the 1.7 million undocumented children of the approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. While precise numbers are not available, a 2003 report from the Urban Institute estimates that sixty-five thousand undocumented persons who have lived in the United States for five years or longer graduate from high school every year, and between seven thousand and thirteen thousand undocumented students enroll in colleges nationally.

Oral History Project

As faculty and administrators at federally designated “Hispanic serving institutions” (defined as colleges and universities having a minimum Latino student population of 25 percent), we came together in part because of the lack of research on the experiences of undocumented students, particularly in the Midwest; our own personal histories with immigration; our ongoing interactions with undocumented students; and our commitment to progressive immigration reform that includes amnesty.

During the course of two years we have collected more than forty oral histories of undocumented students in the Chicago metropolitan area. Research from the Center for Urban Economic Development suggests that approximately twenty thousand undocumented students live within the city limits, thirty-five hundred graduate from high school each year, and 6.1 percent of these high school graduates enroll in a postsecondary institution.

Like many other students we have interviewed, Luz attends a community college. With open access and affordability as a part of their mission, community colleges continue to be the most realistic option for many who would not otherwise have access to a postsecondary education. That includes undocumented

students. National average in-state tuition for the 2009–10 academic year at a community college is \$2,544, compared with \$7,020 for a public four-year university and \$26,273 for a private university. Even though undocumented students often face a tripled price tag for “out-of-state tuition,” a common policy for students who are not considered residents, community colleges continue to be the most affordable higher education option in the United States.

But as many scholars like **Deborah Santiago**, the vice president of policy and research for *Excelencia* in Education, have written, simply enrolling students is not sufficient. Community colleges might be more accessible than four-year institutions, but “serving requires knowing the needs of the students and being intentional about addressing their needs.” Our research and interviews suggest that a lack of institutional transparency in procedures and policies, inadequate financial support, and fear continue to shape how students without a legal visa or permanent resident card negotiate access to higher education.

Federal and State Policies

Access for undocumented students has always been controlled in part by federal and state policies. In the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe*, the court held that states could not discriminate against students enrolling in K–12 public schools in the United States on the basis of their legal status; the decision, however, did not address public education beyond high school.

In the absence of federal guidelines for higher education, states have created their own rules. Although undocumented students can apply to most colleges, they are not eligible for federal or state financial aid. As of 2009, only ten states (California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin) had policies allowing students who attend and graduate from in-state high schools to qualify for in-state tuition regardless of immigration status. Four other states have laws that ban undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition (Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, and North Carolina), while two states (Alabama and South Carolina) ban undocumented students from attending community colleges altogether.

Given that undocumented students do not have valid Social Security cards and cannot work legally in this country, or get federal or state financial aid, tuition at most four-year universities is financially prohibitive.

Luz points out the frustration this barrier creates for undocumented students: “It’s possible for undocumented students to apply, but the way everything is set up, it’s so expensive and you’re not going to get any financial aid, so it’s kind of like they’re teasing you.” Even for students who are able to navigate bureaucracies and pay tuition, obstacles persist.

While it is difficult to assess the total and direct impact immigration status has on the lives of these young people, our research indicates that undocumented youth are under particularly severe psychological stress. As children, they might not have fully experienced the impact of their immigration status, but during high school they become all too aware of the grim futures awaiting them in the United States: physically demanding low-wage work, no opportunities for economic advancement, and sometimes even deportation.

“There are so many things you can’t do and so many limitations that make you feel out of place and make you feel like your arms and legs are tied up and you can’t move,” says Mario, a community college graduate who successfully transferred to a four-year university.

While undocumented students confront difficulties similar to those encountered by many low-income and first-generation college students across the United States, they also face unique challenges. For example, in most states, undocumented students cannot legally drive and have to depend on public transportation and rides from family and friends or put themselves at risk by driving without a license. Their lives and those of their families are at the center of often vicious public debates regarding employment and health care; recently even the right to U.S. citizenship of children born in the United States to undocumented parents has come under attack. Furthermore, with the 2001 folding of Immigration and Naturalization Services into the Department of Homeland Security, the undocumented have become an integral and expanding component of a criminalized class subject to raids, detention in a network of private and public prisons, and deportation. In addition, many undocumented students have difficulty knowing how to negotiate the most basic registration pathways for college and whom to trust to ask questions about their status. This tension is exacerbated by the hesitation of most institutions to formalize resources or widely communicate possible strategies to students—or even to faculty and staff. Those ostensibly closest to the students—their teachers—often lack basic knowledge of the barriers and are sometimes unaware of state and institutional policies.

“It’s hard for teachers to help you because they don’t know,” says Juan, who graduated from a Chicago public high school and was applying for college. “Most people they deal with are U.S. citizens or residents.” This lack of awareness and transparency means that it is up to the student to navigate the system and locate the one or two knowledgeable advocates at the high school or college campus.

Faculty and staff members who are not familiar with immigration policies do not realize that currently there are no pathways for undocumented students to become legal residents. In-state tuition policies may improve access to enrollment, but they are not enough; the federal government must offer avenues for those without legal papers to acquire residency and, if they desire, citizenship.

Legal Path to Citizenship

Comprehensive immigration reform has achieved little success. For almost a decade, proposed federal legislation has foundered. The Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, first introduced in 2001 by Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, attempted to provide a legal path to citizenship for undocumented students. This legislation would provide undocumented students who arrived in the United States before the age of sixteen, have lived in this country for at least five years, and are of “good moral character” temporary residency for six years, during which time they must obtain at least an associate’s degree or complete two years of military service. After satisfying these requirements, a young person could be eligible to receive permanent residency. Those who do not meet the requirements would be subject to deportation. Modified versions of the bill were reintroduced in 2003, 2005, 2007, and, most recently, in March 2009. The DREAM Act was also reintroduced as part of two failed comprehensive immigration reform bills in 2006 and 2007. Despite growing support, eight years later, the legislation still has not passed.

The students we interviewed are highly invested in the DREAM Act because it would provide an option for many undocumented students who currently have no pathway to legalization. The DREAM Act seems to be the only option available, as comprehensive immigration reform is not on the immediate national radar.

The DREAM Act is not ideal, however. While it would help undocumented students enrolled in postsecondary education, it would not help their families. Their parents and siblings who do not attend college would still find themselves with no way to legalize their status. When we talk with students, we quickly learn that they often come from mixed-status families where mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters may or may not be documented. If the DREAM Act passes, thus ensuring pathways to legalization for select youth, will the urgency for comprehensive immigration reform diminish, leaving many who do not fit the requirements of the DREAM Act in a holding pattern? Furthermore, the DREAM Act only addresses a specific time period. One of the provisions of the 2009 version of the DREAM Act required that beneficiaries be between the ages of twelve and thirty-five at the time the bill was enacted. Within a few years, undocumented students graduating from high school would once again have no pathway to legalization. A child who is eleven years old today would not benefit from this bill.

The military-service provision must also be questioned. According to the 2000 Census, 10.4 percent of all Latinos complete a bachelor’s degree, compared with 24.4 percent for the entire population. Given this gap in postsecondary educational attainment, undocumented students who do not enroll in college may view military service as their only option. While adults often make choices among attending college, joining the military, or entering the workforce, undocumented students who do not take the college path, and cannot legally enter the workforce, are faced with military service as the only potential pathway for

legalization. Comprehensive immigration reform would ensure a more equitable choice and allow undocumented students the option to choose among the workforce, college, and the military.

What Educators Can Do

As educators and activists, we write and organize for both short- and long-term goals. Right now, we need to support bills that allow in-state tuition for undocumented students. Since only ten states currently have such laws, we need to work on the other forty. Our research shows that allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition matters greatly to their ability to attend our community colleges and universities.

In the long term, we need comprehensive immigration reform that includes all immigrants. In the meantime, while immigration reform is still under debate, and tuition costs creep up, community colleges (and other postsecondary institutions) must assess whether they are truly serving undocumented students or simply enrolling them. To serve undocumented students, community colleges must create awareness of the struggles faced by this population and clearly communicate institutional policies and available resources to faculty, staff, and feeder high schools. In addition, community colleges must be creative in increasing the financial resources available to undocumented students; more than one or two scholarships must be available. Finally, community colleges must form partnerships with four-year universities to assist undocumented students in the transfer process. While one or two committed advocates on the campus will often do some of this work, comprehensive efforts to address the needs of undocumented students must come more broadly from the faculty and the administration.

As the debate continues, Luz continues to dream and to work for her future. This year, she is attending a community college outside of Chicago. Although paying for college is still difficult, she is able to do it with the help of her family. Her dream is to graduate from her community college and apply to a four-year university to study biology. She is interested in becoming a medical illustrator. Like so many other students we have interviewed, Luz is hopeful and believes that if she is given a chance she can achieve her goals. “I can persevere,” she says. “If you try hard enough you can get anything.” But she cannot do it alone.

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