

# Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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## Ecosystems of Support for Undocumented Students



*College Promise and Educational Testing Service (ETS) partnered to lead five design teams - Promise experts from the research, practitioner, and finance communities - to coauthor reports under the theme, "Ecosystems of Support for Five College Promise Populations." Ryan Corner, Jenny Galvez, and Efen Lopez of Los Angeles Community College District as well as Robert Teranishi and Rachel Freeman of the University of California, Los Angeles led the Undocumented Student team, whose report has been excerpted for this brief.*

Building education equity for undocumented students in higher education is a pressing civil rights issue. Undocumented students are those who have resided in the United States since childhood but do not currently have legal status. They come from a range of races and

socioeconomic statuses, and each student has their own unique immigration history. Not all students in this population qualify for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or the DREAMers program [1]. Anxiety is high among the members of this population due to the threat of deportation, policy constraints, and variations that affect their ability to attend and pay for college and seek employment or further education during and after graduation.

Their situation is exacerbated by a lack of institutional support and lack of trained practitioners. Thus, the burden of helping this population has largely depended on student advocates and student-led organizations. As too many states prevent Promise eligibility for undocumented students, solutions to support this population must increase outreach and engage other parties with educational institutions at the center to drive this work. Undocumented student resource centers (USRCs) on campus provide DREAMers with access to peer support, information, and sorely needed legal services. Staff professional development and specially tailored academic supports can lead to stronger services for these students and help ease mental health issues they often face. Collaboration with community organizations can also yield supportive social and economic networks, mentorships, internships, scholarships, jobs, mental health services, and other opportunities to help undocumented students succeed in college, career, and community life.

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## DATA PROFILE FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

Population: Approximately 11.4 million undocumented immigrants are currently living in the United States, representing nearly a quarter of the US immigrant population. The states with the largest undocumented populations include California, Texas, Florida, Illinois, New York, and New Jersey.

Student Population: Undocumented students are graduating high school and attending college in ever increasing numbers: approximately 125,000 undocumented students reach high school graduation age, and 98,000 undocumented students graduate from high school every year.

Enrollment: The majority (62%) of undocumented students enroll in a community college as their first entry into higher education.

Demographics: Undocumented college student population is remarkably heterogeneous, consisting of Black, Latina/o, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and White individuals and representing positions along the full spectrum of socioeconomic status. They also have a range of immigration histories - originating from more than 55 different countries of origin - and speak a wide variety of languages and dialects.

To work best with this student population, it is important to understand the federal, state, institutional, and community contexts that shape education equity and supports for undocumented students. This brief discusses factors at these multiple levels and provides a menu of recommendations to promote access and success for undocumented students in higher education. These recommendations comprise a holistic view of support for undocumented students (e.g., financial aid, mental health, academic, and legal services) and offer guidance for Promise programs underway across the United States.

Undocumented students themselves have often led the development of programs and policies in higher education [2;3]. Colleges are now asked to support these students' efforts and assume increased responsibility for serving undocumented students, maintaining the partnership and collaboration often initiated by undocumented students. This brief provides a profile of undocumented students and an overview of how colleges can build and sustain best practices within the current policy landscape, especially in regard to the growing College Promise movement.

### College Promise Framework for Supporting Undocumented College Students

The initial challenge in developing a College Promise Ecosystem of Support for undocumented students is the establishment of the criteria for their full participation. The development of a Promise program requires a stipulation of the population served. In most cases, this involves requirements related to where students reside, their high schools, or other local stipulations. Promise programs must determine the eligibility and inclusion of undocumented students. This

**Student Insight: Efren Lopez**

Efren Lopez came to the United States from Mexico at age 3 and lived in a working class neighborhood in Los Angeles.

Due to his undocumented status and a lack of readily available information, Lopez missed important milestones and educational requirements, such as preparing for college by taking the SAT. However, his mother inspired his political awareness, and he enrolled at Los Angeles Pierce College, his local community college. Once enrolled, he met many people, including counselors who gave him guidance and support as well as financial aid support for undocumented students through Californian legislation (AB 540). AB-540 is a California law that allows certain undocumented students to attend public California colleges and universities at in-state tuition rates.

The funding and support enabled Lopez to attend the community college and transfer into the University of California system. At UC Santa Cruz, he created Beyond Dreams, a community building club. Lopez stated that institutions should encourage and support organizations/activities such as these to promote student success. However, Lopez encountered some insensitive institutional staff. About them, he remarked: "They do not relate to you and consider what you went through, so they cannot possibly think of helping you."

He stressed the need for better training of faculty and instructors in interacting with people of different backgrounds and identities. Lopez said that college faculty and staff often do not know what to say or what to ask, which can make them appear insensitive and unable to relate to students, thus preventing them from addressing student needs.

determination requires an evaluation of federal and state policies including any limitations on in-state tuition and fees, regulations on the use of public funding for undocumented persons, and the availability of public and/or private philanthropic financial support.

The second task is to determine the possible sources of funding to support the promise of a free college education. Based on the current state of regulations for undocumented students, it is unlikely that Promise programs will include undocumented students in most states. The use of last-dollar policies, combined with federal financial aid restrictions, further limit the ability for undocumented students to participate in Promise programs. To begin or expand a Promise program for undocumented students, institutions must align their strategy with the specific environment of their state of residence.

<p><b>States Offering In-State Tuition to Undocumented Students (15 states)</b></p>	<p><b>Strategy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review criteria for in-state tuition for undocumented students.</li> <li>Align Promise inclusion criteria to in-state tuition criteria.</li> <li>Assure that Promise program is first dollar.</li> </ul> <p><b>Funding:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Philanthropy:</b> Create a fundraising plan to support the in-state tuition of undocumented Promise students.</li> <li><b>Policy:</b> Advocate for the inclusion of undocumented students in state aid programs and use state aid as first dollar.</li> </ul>
<p><b>States Offering State Financial Aid to Undocumented Students (8 states)</b></p>	<p><b>Strategy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review criteria for state financial aid for undocumented students.</li> <li>Align Promise inclusion criteria to state financial aid criteria.</li> <li>Determine whether the program will be first or last dollar.</li> </ul> <p><b>Funding:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Philanthropy:</b> If the Promise program is first dollar, create a fundraising plan to support the in-state tuition of undocumented Promise students.</li> <li><b>Policy:</b> If the Promise program is last dollar, continue alignment with state financial aid.</li> </ul>
<p><b>States Prohibiting In-State Tuition for Undocumented Immigrants (6 states)</b></p>	<p><b>Strategy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review potential for state policy change.</li> <li>Determine if philanthropy will support nonresident students.</li> <li>Align Promise program criteria to the best possible model for the state context.</li> </ul> <p><b>Funding:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Philanthropy:</b> Create a fundraising plan to support the nonresident tuition of undocumented Promise students.</li> <li><b>Policy:</b> Advocate for undocumented students' eligibility for in-state tuition.</li> </ul>
<p><b>States Banning Admission of Undocumented Immigrants at Some or All Public Colleges (2 states &amp; Georgia University System)</b></p>	<p><b>Strategy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review potential for state policy change.</li> </ul> <p><b>Funding:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Philanthropy:</b> Create a fundraising plan to support the nonresident tuition of undocumented Promise students.</li> <li><b>Policy:</b> Advocate for undocumented students' eligibility for in-state tuition.</li> </ul>

**States Without  
Explicit Legislation  
on Tuition or State  
Financial Aid for  
Undocumented  
Immigrants  
(19 states)**

**Strategy:**

- Review potential for state policy change.
- Align Promise program criteria to the best possible model for the state context.

**Funding:**

- Philanthropy: Create a fundraising plan to support the nonresident tuition of undocumented Promise students.
- Policy: Advocate for undocumented students' eligibility for in-state tuition.

Some required Promise program elements will need to be adapted to meet the needs of undocumented students. While enrollment and maintaining academic standards generally require few or no modifications, it will be necessary to remove the requirement to complete the state financial aid form when a state does not offer in-state tuition to undocumented students. Programs will also need to consider the barrier related to the possible release of sensitive information when applying for financial aid. Programs will also need to consider aligning with the needs for undocumented students when it comes to participation in activities.

### *Student Supports for Undocumented Promise Students*

Resource Centers for Undocumented Students: College campuses can act on their commitment to support undocumented students by establishing and maintaining USRCs, centralized hubs of information that engage administrators, faculty, staff, and students. They are safe, one-stop spaces for students, where staff serve as liaisons to both on and off-campus resources. These centers seek to build a sense of community for students and educate the campus on establishing best practices to serve their undocumented student population. To adequately serve students, these spaces need access to computers, supplies, printing, and working space. USRCs provide services to students who are residents and citizen students who are part of mixed status families, as well.

Legal Services: Colleges have the opportunity to establish partnerships with legal organizations that are vetted to provide free services for this population. The USRCs can partner with these legal firms and non-profit organizations by hosting immigration clinics, workshops, and trainings on campuses. The services can range from free review of students' immigration cases to covering costs for DACA application renewals. Beyond the one-on-one services, legal organizations aid the campus community by facilitating "Know Your Rights" training and family preparedness workshops, which aid families in preparing for possible family separation through deportation.

Mental and Physical Health: Rising anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions over the years have directly affected the mental health of undocumented students. Fear of deportation, lack of educational and occupational options during and after graduation, stigma, and the resulting isolation and loneliness can lead to substance abuse, self-harm, depression, and even suicide for this population [4]. Some states have expanded health care rights to include specific undocumented populations.

**This policy brief is part of a five-part series by College Promise and ETS on "Depicting the Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for Five College Promise Populations."**

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Read the full report:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ets2.12299>

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Colleges have also responded to mental and health needs by partnering with local organizations to facilitate and establish safe spaces for students to discuss the critical issues impacting their education. Such safe spaces include workshops with mental health professionals, informal "talking circles," and streamlined referral services.

Academic Support Programs: Academic support is a critical factor in supporting undocumented students' success in college. It is important to embed resources and support for undocumented students in first year programs, orientations, and academic courses. Colleges can also develop programs specifically catered to undocumented students, such as summer bridge programs and first-year seminars.

Faculty Support: Faculty can demonstrate their support to undocumented students by including safe space language, such as adding a UndocuSupporter logo (i.e., the "Migration is beautiful" butterfly). By faculty identifying themselves, they are serving as connections to on-campus resources, such as the USRC.

Training for Faculty, Staff, Practitioners, and Allies: The complexity of policies that impact undocumented students makes training and educational campaigns integral parts of building support. Training can be divided into two categories: ally and staff. Ally training focuses on developing support for undocumented students across the campus. The training covers how to review policies, practices, and updates about immigration. The goal of ally training is to build a collective of individuals who are committed to serving students, including challenging or eliminating current practices that are barriers in the students' academic careers. Traditional staff trainings to review and reform college policies should address what the institution is doing and can do to improve the availability, coordination, and streamlining of institutional practices (e.g., reducing paperwork burdens and implementing evidence-based best practices to better serve undocumented students).

Task Forces: Beyond training, the establishment of advisory committees and/or task forces that convene campus wide allies is an important strategy to develop campus wide equity for undocumented students. Even at campuses with a USRC, task forces are an important strategy for clarifying and expanding the institutional responsibilities of the greater campus community in supporting undocumented students beyond the USRC. The same advisory committee and/or task force should also be implemented at the systemwide or district level, where campuses are not standalone institutions.

Online Access to Resources and Information: Online presence is vital for education programs. Having a college website that serves as a hub of information, including types of financial aid available to undocumented students and sources of legal support, can be very beneficial for undocumented students, especially students who may fear exposing themselves by seeking information in person.

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

Learn more at: [collegepromise.org](http://collegepromise.org) or email [info@collegepromise.org](mailto:info@collegepromise.org)

**Relationship with Local High Schools:** Although immigration affects students throughout their lives, many students begin encountering academic restrictions in K-12 because of their status once they start applying to college. Like many services pertaining to first-generation students, the earlier students know about the resources available to them, the better. Thus, early education campaigns that highlight resources and provide information on how to access these resources can be extremely beneficial to undocumented students.

## Conclusion

Especially now, colleges and universities have the opportunity to act: to build and sustain more equitable policies and practices for undocumented students. Colleges should develop a detailed understanding of the federal, state, institutional, and local contexts that impact education equity for undocumented students. They should also assess their current policy and programmatic landscape for undocumented students. There are a number of policies that Promise programs and their partner institutions can implement to support this student population:

- Increase access to financial support (i.e., scholarships, stipends, and paid internships)
- Develop clear protocols and streamlined forms, specific to undocumented students
- Integrate relevant curricula that invite discussion regarding services and supports for undocumented students on and off campus
- Develop and implement regulations for responding to Immigration and Customs Enforcement requests

Upon investigating college-specific needs, this brief's menu of recommendations should be useful to guide colleges as they address and increase their support for undocumented students in their specific and unique contexts.

## References

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