**Report on Supporting Undocumented Students**

**Including Best Practices**

**About:** Mayra Cardozo and Salvador Oregon Torres of the Grassroots Leadership team at United Way of Salt Lake (UWSL) conducted a community-based research project focused on answering, addressing, and learning what best practices and barriers exist for undocumented students and the advisors supporting them in navigating higher education. We aimed to answer this question through surveys, student interviews, and focus groups.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this document is to reflect and report the key data that was collected throughout this project. This document was created by Mayra Cardozo and Salvador Oregon Torres, themselves members of the undocumented community, with the intention to create equitable solutions and accessible resources for both advisors and students.

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**Current Baseline Knowledge:**

Below are some key findings from the survey and data collected around advisors’ (defined as counselors, UCAC advisors, educators, etc.) baseline knowledge when supporting undocumented students. It is broken down into the following four categories:

1. Training Received
2. Undocu Basics
3. Confidence When Working with Undocumented Students
4. Knowledge About Resources

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**1. Trainings Received**

Most counselors and educators reported that they have not received specific training around work with undocumented students. They noted that they use the internet and/or the Utah College Advising Corps (UCAC) advisor in their school as their main resources when supporting undocumented students, which has created gaps in knowledge within our schools.

“**We have a UCAC advisor, and he is great in supporting undocumented students, however, he is leaving this year and I am worried.”**

When a majority of advisors are not trained in supporting undocumented students, it can lead to higher referral rates of students to UCAC advisors. High referral rates affect students, making many feel unsupported and frustrated. Similar negative effects can be felt by UCAC advisors in these situations; many expressed feeling overwhelmed by the number of students referred.

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**Have you received specific training regarding working with undocumented students?**

- No: 79%
- Yes: 20%
- I don't know: 1%
2. Undocu Basics*

More than half of the advisors answered “No” and “I Don’t Know,” when asked if they understood the proper terminology to use when supporting a student and if they understood the purpose of and how to help students filling for HB144. When advisors are not aware of the basic support available to undocumented students it can affect students on individual and institutional levels. On the individual level, advisors’ lack of knowledge around basic undocumented student resources can leave students feeling alone and unsupported. Institutionally, lack of awareness of the purpose of HB144 can lead to students paying out-of-state tuition or being labeled as international students; both outcomes create unnecessary barriers for undocumented students pursuing higher education.

Impact of Language: When working with undocumented students it is important to understand their experiences and the history of trauma within the community. As advisors, it is important to recognize how the language we use can impact students. Terms such as “illegal” and “alien” continue to other and criminalize the undocumented community and can create a situation that (re)traumatizes a student. These terms should be avoided, and it is strongly encouraged that terms such as “undocumented” or “DACAmented” be used instead.

3. Confidence When Working with Undocumented Students

We found that most advisors say they do not feel confident in providing resources to undocumented students or connecting/advising undocumented students. This lack of familiarity and confidence in their ability to support was also noted multiple times by students throughout our survey and interviews, and some noted that it led them to feel discouraged from seeking support.

“My counselor was not familiar with the experiences and resources for undocumented students. They also seemed uncomfortable talking about it which made me feel uncomfortable seeking support.”

3. Knowledge About Resources

We noticed large differences in knowledge of resources throughout the sample of advisors we surveyed. Generally, we found that the Utah College Advising Corps (UCAC), AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), and Latinos in Action (LIA) educators were more familiar with different resources available for undocumented students. High school counselors reported they were less familiar with different resources for undocumented students. Many counselors stated they relied heavily on their UCAC advisors as the main resource for supporting undocumented students.

“My counselor never brought up any resources. My only memory of my counselor is getting no support or resources.”

* The phrase “Undocu Basics” refers to the basic knowledge around being undocumented. This can include but is not exclusive to the following: knowledge on proper terminology, understanding of what it means to be undocumented or DACAmented, knowledge of common legislation both nationally and locally that affect undocumented students (Dream Act, HB144, etc.).
Best Practices

This section highlights some best practices that both students and advisors have identified as being helpful when supporting undocumented students.

Provide Resources Outside of Scholarships

80% of students reported needing resources and support outside of scholarships. Advisors should be aware of resources that can support students’ other needs which impact their academic success. We suggest turning to community organizations for additional resources (see page 4 of this document: Centralized Resources).

- Students reported needing the following resources:
  - Food bank/food security resources
  - Housing/Rental assistance
  - Legal support (ex. Filing for DACA)
  - Support if a parent/caretaker is detained
  - Access to mental health care (mental health providers who have worked with undocumented individuals in the past/experienced being undocumented)

- Learn which resources are available (and which are not) to someone who is undocumented.
  - Example: Undocumented individuals don’t have access to food stamps or the stimulus checks that were issued during the pandemic.

Ensure Resources are Accessible

- Ensure that brochures and flyers are accessible to students and are available in different languages.

- Ensure resource materials created by the local Dream Centers are available to students (links included on page 4 of this document: Centralized Resources).

- These resources should be accessible, visual, and located next to other student resources in the office or other safe spaces where students and families are more likely to engage with and benefit from the resource.
  - These resources should also be available on school websites to increase participation. Documentation status is a very private matter, so students may be more willing to engage with resources online instead of picking up a flyer in the office.

Find Ways to Include Families in the Process

- For many students in the undocumented community, the journey to higher education is a major transition that affects them and their entire family. Many students shared finding the strength, persistence, and motivation to pursue higher education because of their family.

- We encourage counselors to involve parents and family members in these discussions.

- As a best practice, counselors should strive to create a welcoming space for the families of undocumented students. Make sure you are creating an accessible and safe place for families whose primary language is not English.
  - Example 1: Provide interpretation if possible (try to avoid making students translate for their families).
  - Example 2: Decenter text with art and visual images. Include art by artists from representative identities like artist Julio Salgado or poet Yosimar Reyes (links included on page 4 of this document: Centralized Resources).

- Include family resources/materials from different community organizations (ex: Comunidades Unidas)
  - Involve parents in conversations on how the school can be more inclusive towards them and their student.
  - Understand trauma, and recognize that schools have been a harmful and/or criminalizing institution for many students and families.

“My biggest support has been my family—without my family I would have never applied to a university because I felt like it wasn’t a safe place for me.”

Best Practices continued on page 4...
Best Practices continued from page 3:

Create Leadership Positions Within Schools
– Create leadership opportunities that are accessible and available to undocumented students. Many students who were interviewed expressed an interest in and need for more opportunities to engage with their community.
– When sharing leadership opportunities with students, consider:
  • Will the student face any limitation due to documentation if they participate in this leadership opportunity?

Engage with an Asset-Based Framework
– It is important to recognize and acknowledge the resiliency and strengths within the undocumented community. Rather than approaching students from a place of what they lack or highlighting deficits, think of how you can support and build on the skills and strengths that undocumented students hold.

Adapt Inclusive Advising Approaches
– Schedule or create spaces that are inclusive to folks of all documentation statuses.
  • Although valuable for some families and students, “FAFSA” nights are not inclusive of undocumented students and their families. Students noted that framing these events solely in terms of FAFSA applications made them feel left out of the discussion on how to pay for college.
– As a best practice, we encourage advisors to think of how to make these traditional college readiness events welcoming and inclusive to all.
  • **Example 1:** Change the name from “FAFSA” focused to “Resources for Paying for College.”
  • **Example 2:** Invite community organizations to discuss different strategies or resources to support undocumented students in paying for higher education.
  • Many advisors identified including resources for undocumented students in all events/student outreach as a best practice. This helps ensure that all students who need the information have access to learn more and discuss without having to disclose their documentation status.

Centralized Resources for Students and Educators:

- Step-by-step instructions filling out DACA forms, and for DACA financial resources: https://utahdaca.com/about/
- Legal clinics in the state that can help answer immigration questions: https://www.immigrationadvocates.org/nonprofit/legaldirectory/search?state=UT
- COVID relief funds for immigrants: https://www.informedimmigrant.com/guides/coronavirus
- Presentation from Loyola University on creating safe spaces for undocumented students: https://ignatiansolidarity.net/blog/2017/01/20/creating-safe-spaces-for-undocumented-students/
- HB144: https://educate-utah.org/hb144-facts/
- DACA: https://www.fwd.us/daca-101/
- Scholarships and list of internships/fellowships that undocumented students can apply for nationwide: https://mydocumentedlife.org/
- UndocuAlly Resource Page, University of Utah: https://dream.utah.edu/resources.php

For more information, contact Madison Sudweeks at madison.sudweeks@uw.org or visit uw.org.

Credit to: Mayra Cardozo for being the primary author of this report and for conducting the research alongside Salvador Oregon Torres.