

# Immigration policy poses unique challenge for undocumented undergrads

January 27 2015, by Kathy Wyer

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Nearly a quarter of a million undocumented undergraduates, who largely come from low-income families and work their way through college, are experiencing unique challenges and high levels of stress as they struggle to succeed in higher education, according to a UCLA study.

The report, "In the Shadows of the Ivory Tower: Undocumented Undergraduates and the Liminal State of Immigration Reform," from the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies surveyed 909 undocumented undergraduates across 34 states who emigrated from 55 different countries of origin. Participants attended an array of two-year and four-year public and private colleges that range in selectivity.

The first and largest of its kind, the study presents a number of implications for policymakers, as well as colleges and universities. Findings from the study were presented on Jan. 26, at a meeting presented by the California Community Foundation in Los Angeles.

"This study provides a new and alarming picture of what undocumented college students are facing," said Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, a co-principal investigator of the study and dean of UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. "The time has come for colleges and universities to unequivocally commit to supporting undocumented students as members of their campus communities. These students are studying and working hard, and they long to belong. It is high time to fully embrace them. These new data suggest a blueprint for providing a

safe environment in which they may learn and succeed."

With 61.3 percent of undocumented students coming from families living on an annual household income of less than \$30,000, 72.4 percent were working while attending college, hindering their ability to succeed academically. More than half (56.7 percent) reported being "extremely concerned" about paying for their college education. Among those students who reported stopping their studies temporarily, 73.9 percent indicated financial difficulties were the cause.

The study also found that more than three-quarters of participants reported worrying about being detained or deported. More than half (55.9 percent) indicated they personally know someone who has been deported, including a parent (5.7 percent) or a sibling (3.2 percent).

Perhaps most notably, the combination of financial hardship and fear of deportation have created a perfect storm of stress, the study showed, as 28.5 percent of male and 36.7 percent of female participants reported stress levels that could indicate a serious psychological problem. By contrast, only 4 percent of males and 9 percent of females typically report stress levels this high.

On average, participants had resided 14.8 years in the U.S. and, in most cases, the majority of their lives have been spent in the United States. An overwhelming 90.4 percent of respondents reported they would become U.S. citizens if they could.

Finding safe harbor and support within a community of those who share similar backgrounds and circumstance, 73.1 percent of respondents reported making use of organizations, centers or safe spaces to gather and share experiences with other undocumented students.

The report identified another source of support for respondents in the

Federal Government's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which provides temporary lawful presence for undocumented youth and young adults, and was beneficial to some undocumented students relative to their financial stability and well-being.

"With DACA, more [undocumented students](#) are coming out of the shadows," said UCLA professor Robert Teranishi, co-principal investigator of the study. "Higher education faculty and practitioners need to be aware of these students' unique life circumstances, as well as more knowledgeable about resources on campus that can respond to their specific challenges and needs."

DACA recipients were most likely to be female and attending four-year public and private colleges or universities. Nearly two-thirds (65.9 percent) of undocumented undergraduates applied for and received DACA. A strong majority (85.5 percent) of students with DACA reported it had a positive impact on their education.

Yet 89.6 percent of DACA recipients compared with 70.8 percent DACA non-recipients reported ongoing worries about the detentions of friends and family, which are correlated with higher levels of anxiety among DACA recipients.

Among respondents in the study, 48.2 percent attended four-year public colleges or universities, 42.4 percent were enrolled in two-year public colleges, and 9.4 percent attended private colleges.

Slightly more than two-thirds of those surveyed (67.6 percent) were first-generation college students, meaning neither parent had attended college.

**More information:** See the full report here:  
[www.undocuscholars.org/assets/...holarsreport2015.pdf](http://www.undocuscholars.org/assets/...holarsreport2015.pdf)

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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