

Title: A Dream Deferred: Undocumented DC High School Graduates and the Challenges Faced to Transition to College and Career Development

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Rationale

Undocumented students represent one of the most vulnerable groups of students in the District of Columbia Public School (DCPS). Each year, there is an increase in the number of undocumented students who graduate from DCPS and who experience great challenges in their pursuit to transition to college or to career development. As the increase of undocumented students continues to accelerate there is a great need to establish practices that supports them. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, for school year 2015-2016 the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high schools in the nation was 84 percent. More than four out of five students graduated with a regular high school diploma within 4 years of starting 9th grade (NCES, 2018). The *Center for American Progress*, a public policy research and advocacy organization, estimate in 2015 that nationally more than 80,000 undocumented students turn 18 and approximately 65,000 graduates from high school (Flores, 2015). The Pew Research Center a non-partisan fact tank, reported in 2009 that 54% of the undocumented students have at least a high school diploma. The United States Department of Education reported in 2015 that only 5 to 10 percent of undocumented high school graduates continue their education and enroll in an institution of higher education. Fewer undocumented students successfully graduate from college with a degree. For students who are undocumented, their chances of graduating from college are compounded with the present political climate. With the recent reforms of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) program which offered temporary protection to undocumented migrants who arrived in the United States as children, (also known as DREAMERS) undocumented DCPS students face unprecedented difficulty as they prepare to transition to college or career development.

Literature Review

Educators for Fair Consideration: *An Overview of College-Bound Undocumented Students* (2014) highlights one of the primary obstacles that students face. Stating that the most crucial obstacle for college bound student is financial needs. The most recent immigration reform proposals by the Trump Administration — including the president’s decision to rescind a bill to enact into law the Obama-era DACA program, increases the struggle for a college education and career development for undocumented students. Based on these policies undocumented students cannot qualify for federal and most state-based financial aid, including grants, work study jobs or loan programs.

According to the Urban Institute/Children of Immigrants: *Access to Education – Challenges and Opportunities for Immigrant Students* (June, 2014). “Undocumented status becomes a significant barrier after youth leave high school. Undocumented youth who graduate from high school face significant barriers to everything typically associated with youth of that age, including driving, working, and receiving financial aid for higher education. With an estimated 65,000 undocumented students graduating from American high schools every year, this is an important issue not only for these youth, but for the entire country.”

Passel, J.S. 2006. *The size and characteristics of the unauthorized migration population in the US estimates based on the March 2005 current population Survey*. Washington, D.C: Pew Hispanic Center emphasizes the challenges that undocumented students face stating that “These students may dedicate themselves to pursuing college degrees only to find their dreams shattered. Over 65 thousand undocumented students who graduate from high school every year are not eligible to work legally and do not qualify for financial aid.”

Wenner, A. 2018. *On the Campus Journeys of Hardship and Hope: DACA students Share Their Stories*. Highlights that although there are many challenges for undocumented students many of them demonstrate perseverance and diligence and are able to attend ivy league colleges, become members of civil rights organizations, and other civil engagement patterns that benefits their community.

Data/Tools/Process

DACA continues to be one of the most salient issues leading the immigration debate. On television, on neighborhood billboards, on the internet, and the presence of continued organized protestors, here in Washington, D.C., it is almost impossible to overlook the issue. According to the American Immigration Council, more than 10,000 U.S. citizens in D.C. live with at least one family member who is undocumented. 25,000 undocumented immigrants comprised 26 percent of the immigrant population and 3.9 percent of the total population in 2014. As of 2017 there were 963 students of the District who applied for DACA. (American Immigration Council). Since the District is a sanctuary city no one knows for sure the exact figure of undocumented high school students who graduate each year as city schools are not allowed to collect information on the immigration status of students. With the current reforms it is uncertain how these students will be affected. Advocacy organizations in support of undocumented students continue to demand more rights and opportunities, while anti-immigrant protestors advocate for tighter restrictions and even deportation. The issue continues to be fluid. Judge John D. Bates of the Federal District Court for the District of Columbia states that the Trump’s administration termination of the program was based on “virtually unexplained” grounds that the program was “unlawful.” Judge Bates has since ruled that the protections must stay in place and has ordered the government to resume accepting new applications. “The judge stayed his decision for 90 days and gave the Department of Homeland Security, the opportunity to better explain its reasoning for canceling it. If the department fails to do so, it “must accept and process new as well as renewal DACA applications.” (Jordan, 2018). While some see this as a triumph for undocumented students, others are cautious because despite two other similar rulings by Federal judge in Brooklyn and San Francisco neither of these decisions requires the government to accept new applications. About 700,000 undocumented immigrants, of which DCPS undocumented high school graduates are included, must renew their DACA status every two years. Immigration advocates hailed Jude Bates ruling saying it highlighted the failure of the administration to justify the program’s termination. However, the Department of Justice states that “promoting and enforcing the rule of law is vital to protecting a nation, its borders, and its citizens.” Despite broad bipartisan support for the beneficiaries of the program, Congress has failed to agree on a solution. (Jordan, 2018).

As part of my research I interviewed undocumented high school graduate students who were referred to me by colleagues. I also distributed paper questionnaire to students. These students graduated from DC public high schools in 2015 and 2016. I created my interview questions

based on my research purpose, which is to broaden awareness of the unique challenges that undocumented students face on the road to college and career development.

The core questions I asked were:

1. Are you a graduate of DCPS who is undocumented in the USA?
2. What were some of the obstacles you faced, if any, as you try to transition to college or engage in career development?
3. Did you have someone in your school who provided you with resources to navigate college?
4. How do the recent reforms on DACA affect you?
5. Are you involved in any community organizations that advocate for undocumented youth?
6. Were you offered any alternative programs in school other than college?

In our conversations we spoke of their present experiences and what they look forward to for the future.

Findings:

As I conducted the survey one of the greatest challenges I encountered was students' fear of giving information on their immigration status. Once the word "undocumented" was mentioned most students expressed their concerns that the information may be used against them or their families. For example, 80% of the students wanted to know if I was collecting information for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These students feared deportation or immigration detention for themselves or their families. Another significant finding is the vital role of educators such as counselors and teachers, community organizations, family members and other caring adults play in providing support for undocumented graduate students. However, a poignant finding indicates that only a fraction of undocumented students graduate from college. Most families are poor and cannot afford to pay out of pocket expenses. 60% of students the students questioned engaged in part-time employment while attending high school in order to meet their own financial obligations.

On a more optimistic note, findings indicate that some students are resilient and find ways to harness the support to complete college. However the findings support that "though federal law does not prohibit undocumented students from attending colleges and universities, undocumented youth face significant barriers to higher education. Undocumented students are barred from receiving federal financial aid, including grants, student loans, and federal work study. This exclusion extends to most state financial aid eligibility, and undocumented students are often ineligible for private scholarships. Undocumented students are also excluded from programs such as Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Service (TRIO), important and effective federal initiatives aimed at assisting low income students in matriculation, retention, and graduation." (Urban Institute/Children of Immigrants, 2014).

Data Analysis

The data from the research indicates that:

- The number one obstacle for attending college and career development is financial needs.

- Community organizations play a vital role in supporting undocumented students in the form of advocacy, expanded opportunities for academic and career advancement, and navigating immigration and civil rights.
- Despite the obstacles, some undocumented students are able to find ways to attend certificate programs, two and four-year institutions .
- Most of the undocumented youths that I surveyed are resilient and highly motivated.

Policy Recommendations

-Undocumented students need help becoming naturalized citizens.

-School counselors and teachers need to have more knowledge and training on how to help undocumented students navigate high school and transition to college successfully.

- Schools administrators need to demonstrate an understanding of the challenges that these students face in order for them to succeed in public schools and transition to higher education and career development.

- Offer support to community and grass-root organizations who advocate for undocumented youth.

- Lobby on behalf of undocumented youth to political leaders in states and federal offices in support of political reforms that supports undocumented youths.

- Become active in lobbying in passing of the DACA act which will give undocumented students access to higher education and career development

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