

N DEI Feature: **Advising Meets Institutional Advocacy: Creating Systems of Support for Undocumented Students**

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Abstract:

The percentage of undocumented students in higher education is lower than their U.S. citizen peers and even lower for undocumented students pursuing graduate and professional programs. Advisors and administrators can support the advancement of undocumented students through higher education through self-teaching, advocacy, and coalition building. Advising and working with undocumented students includes understanding immigration and state and federal policies. In addition, advising these students calls for educators to advocate for changes to requirements and processes that block the advancement of students who are undocumented into higher education and the workforce.

Keywords:

undocumented, DACA, dreamers, undocuAlly, advocacy, advising

Introduction

“Recently, I sought help from my pre-health advisor because I was struggling to find resources to guide me in terms of how to get patient care hours or how to apply to a physician assistant program as an undocumented individual. Unfortunately, he couldn't support me and implied that I should look for another career and consider why I wanted to be a physician assistant. I understand that it's challenging to find resources, but I cannot be the first undocumented person to apply to PA school. I also don't want to give up my dream because someone couldn't help me find the right resources.”

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2024 PHD Student Participant

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Pre-Health Dreamers (PHD) was established in 2012 and works with institutions to develop support and equitable processes for undocumented students. It serves undocumented students, addressing the gap in support at health-related programs available to this population, and raises awareness regarding the need for robust financial aid, safe spaces, best advising practices, and entrepreneurship guidance for undocumented students.

PHD presented *Creating Systems of Financial and Holistic Support for Undocumented Students* at the Western Association of Advisors for the Health Professions (WAAHP) Regional Meeting in April 2023. This article covers topics from PHD's WAAHP workshop and answers questions PHD has received from pre-health advisors. In addition, this article equips and encourages educators to support undocumented students pursuing undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs to increase their enrollment and graduation rates.

Background***Undocumented Individuals: Definitions***

PHD specializes its work around students and young professionals who are undocumented and who may have temporary protection, including but not limited to:

- **Undocumented Individuals.** These individuals are “immigrants who reside in the United States without legal status” (Immigrants Rising, 2023)
- **Individuals Under Temporary Protective Status (TPS).** Foreign nationals are allowed to remain in the United States if something catastrophic happens in their country of origin preventing their safe return as part of a temporary program (Share My Lesson, 2023)
- **Individuals Who Were Granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).** These individuals are part of a federal program “providing temporary relief from deportation (deferred action) and work authorization to certain young undocumented immigrants” (American Immigration Council, 2021)
- **Asylum Seekers/Refugees.** These individuals “are foreign nationals already in the U.S. or arriving at the border who meet the international law definition of a ‘refugee.’ A refugee is a person who is unable to return to his or her home country and cannot obtain protection in that country, due to past persecution or a well-founded fear of being persecuted in the future” (American Immigration Council, 2020)

Undocumented Individuals: Numbers

According to a report by the Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and American Immigration Council, “more than 408,000 (approximately 1.9% of all students) undocumented students [were] enrolled in higher education” nationwide in

2021 (Hubbard & Feldblum, 2023). This analysis showed that California led with 83,000 undocumented students enrolled in higher education; Texas was second with 59,000, then Florida (40,000), New York (30,000), and Illinois (20,000).

PHD: Impact***Positioned To Understand Need***

Based on the co-founders' and staff's personal experience, PHD knows the need to provide support, training, and resources that help advance undocumented students enrolled in higher education. Furthermore, PHD sees the increased impact of training advisors and administrators in higher education who have access to this population. For example, during the 2022–2023 programming year, PHD guided over 194 students pursuing health-related programs.

Of the students served, 48 were from PHD’s Peer Engagement and Enrichment Program (PEEP), which is an annual graduate pipeline program for undocumented students. Annually, PEEP hosts approximately 45–60 students who are undocumented and are pursuing a health-related career, and 50–60% of participants attend a community college or a 4-year university.

Based on participant PEEP applications for the 2023 cohort, 63–77% of participants listed the following four areas as the most challenging obstacles in their journey: finding internships (77%), financial aid support (70%), career advising (67%), and finding employment (65%). Fifty-one percent of participants also mentioned that it was difficult to find advisors who knew how to advise undocumented students. Similarly, the current applications for the 2024 cohort also show that applicants are having difficulty finding financial aid support (70%), career advising and internships (58%), and advisors who know how to advise undocumented students (56%).

PHD knows that by connecting with and providing training and support to advisors, educators, administrators, and liaisons, PHD’s impact on students will be higher.

Nationwide Partnerships

PHD partners with students and educators nationwide. Even though 50% of the population PHD serves resides in California, in recent years, the number of students and educators with whom PHD worked from other states, especially Florida, North Carolina, and New York, has increased.

A student’s state and county, and even the school or program they attend, can play an essential role in the student's success. For example, aside from California, Texas, Florida, and New York have the most undocumented residents in comparison to other states (Hubbard & Feldblum, 2023). These three

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states have implemented laws regarding in-state tuition for undocumented students; however, Florida does not have access to state financial aid for undocumented students (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023a). Also, Texas and Florida do not have laws that extend driver's licenses to undocumented residents (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023a, 2023b). This information is important for advisors and their institutions to know when advising undocumented students.

Advice to Advisors and Institutions***Step 1. Be an Advocate: Support Student Dreams***

Students will likely stay in college when they feel safe, supported, and understood. Advising, counseling, and career services tailored to undocumented students' needs can help them graduate with fewer roadblocks. On an institutional level, programs can welcome undocumented students by posting welcoming language on school websites and student centers, hiring an UndocuLiasion, launching an UndocuTask Force that focuses on supporting students, or creating a Dream Center; these actions send a message to the students that they "belong." To learn more about launching a task force, click [here](#) and [here](#).

On the individual advising level, a first step that advisors can take toward helping undocumented students feel safe, supported, and understood is to focus on looking for ways for students to achieve their goals rather than looking to direct students to new goals. Initially, this can be as simple as not advising students to change their major, as happened to the 2024 PHD student participant quoted above.

PHD discourages educators from advising undocumented students to change their majors due to their status. Regardless of the chosen career path, undocumented individuals will hit barriers in their journey. It is essential to let students know the pros and cons of pursuing specific careers and let them decide on how to move forward. Instead of advising students to change their major, PHD recommends changing grandfathered processes, finding creative solutions, and advocating and researching policies that support undocumented students in their institutions and state of residence. PHD also encourages examining out-of-state policies that provide pathways for students who feel more comfortable moving rather than changing their major.

But advising undocumented students goes well beyond advising on majors. Undocumented students need champions—having advocates is vital for their success. Therefore, advisors should take extra steps in the advising process to question on- and off-campus procedures, scholarship requirements, and guidance that block undocumented students from reaching a resource, experience, or service. For example, when advisors see that resources are closed to undocumented students due to

citizenship or social security number requirements (see below), they are encouraged to connect with the source and advocate to remove the barriers. Deans and directors are encouraged to support their team by leveraging their connections and helping advocate for the students—PHD has constantly witnessed educators who have helped open doors for undocumented students based on their campus and community connections. Once educators master this skill, they are encouraged to train students who must self-advocate through their educational and professional journeys.

Even more, supporting undocumented students and being informed on how students should prepare for graduate degrees, the workforce, and economic mobility can increase the rate of undocumented students pursuing graduate and professional degrees. Remember to advise students at their own pace; based on experience, undocumented students may have had experiences that affected their trust in educators. Do not take it personally if students do not trust or believe your knowledge immediately; remember that it may be a trauma response. Try to create a welcoming and safe environment and be patient. Finally, be honest with your students. Know your capacity and the school's current capacity to support them, especially financially. Be upfront about the resources available so students are not surprised and placed in a challenging situation.

Step 2. Understand Institutional Policies, Especially Around Financial Aid

A big hurdle for undocumented students seeking to pursue higher education is the cost. Financial aid policies vary state by state, but advisors should also be aware of the policies at their institutions and how these affect undocumented students. There might also be opportunities or the opportunity to create opportunities for these students, about which advisors should educate themselves and get involved.

For example, some schools admit undocumented, DACA, TPS, and refugees as international students, which can work for some institutions and some undocumented students; however, it can also add to the barriers that some students face. Specifically, classifying undocumented students as international students may result in disqualification from certain financial aid opportunities, bank statement requirements (proof of large amounts of money in the bank), escrow requirements, and more. If programs require the items above, such as escrow requirements, PHD encourages them to evaluate and determine if they can change processes to enroll undocumented students as domestic.

Additionally, due to a lack of institutional aid for their entire student population, programs often revert to adding a U.S. citizen or permanent resident requirement. Institutions that admit DACA recipients have traditionally instructed them to seek off-campus financial aid resources by seeking loans

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that require a U.S. citizen co-signer. In previous years, PHD has witnessed undocumented students in very tough and sometimes dangerous positions to find a U.S. citizen co-signer, who usually is not a family member.

Responsible advising and financial assistance are vital for this population. In recent years, schools—public and private—have set out to create institutional aid for undocumented students. Creating institutional aid can be a short-term or long-term goal depending on whether the institution is public or private, a smaller or larger institution or program, how long the school/program has been established, and the amount of funding secured from private donors. Though very helpful, and we encourage all schools to venture into creating institutional aid, here are other steps educators and campus staff can take:

- Vet campus scholarships for U.S. citizenship or permanent residency requirements and inquire whether that requirement can be removed. With the exception of federal funding, monies from other pockets may be used to support scholarships open to all students.
- Instead of starting a scholarship, learn who already has one and encourage them to make it available for undocumented students. In return, support the scholarship fund and help with fundraising efforts.
- Partner with the foundation office. Frequently, the foundation office may be speaking with funders, seeking new grants to write, and networking with individuals who may want to support undocumented students. Training the foundation office on the needs of undocumented students, the importance of their enrollment in the program, and the impact that the program can have with funding that supports this population may go a long way.
- If the institution or program has an endowment, find out how the endowment funds are used. Some institutions fund research, scholarships, and other ventures using endowment funds. If they provide scholarships, ask if undocumented students can apply. Even if the endowment is not created for scholarships, PHD encourages leaders and students in the institution to meet with the endowment committee to bring awareness to undocumented students and ask if opening up a part of the funding to provide scholarships to students is possible.

Note that working with endowments takes time, and endowment committees may only meet occasionally, so continuous communication is vital so that they prioritize the need. Also, some endowment funding has restrictions, so it may take time for the committee to adopt your input. Find the support of stakeholders in your institution. And again, educating with positivity and a welcoming spirit may take you further than not.

Remember that undocumented students identify with various groups and backgrounds. A fund for undocumented students is helpful; however, undocumented students may also fall under other categories that make them eligible for scholarships, such as a scholarship for first-generation students, Black, Latino, or Asian students, need-based scholarships, and/or scholarships based on their desired degree. Any scholarship can be accessible to undocumented students if the committee removes the U.S. citizenship requirement. If there is a FAFSA requirement, work with the student and financial aid office to submit one or speak with financial aid directors to research if the campus can create an in-house application for students who do not qualify for FAFSA to determine their estimated family contribution (EFC). Speak with scholarship committees to discuss ways a student's EFC can be determined other than using FAFSA (Federal Student Aid, n.d.).

By supporting students and making change happen with them, educators minimize the sentiment of “othering.” Undocumented students constantly feel the need to prove themselves; they feel that they are asked to have special abilities that programs would never request from their citizen peers.

Step 3. Understand State Policies

Overview

State and institutional policies are only some of the obstacles students face; advisors can also stop or delay a student's journey by not understanding policies and processes that support undocumented students. So, a third step in advising undocumented students is to understand state policies that support undocumented students when they pursue higher education, including policies on driver's licenses, healthcare access, in-state tuition, financial aid, and professional licensure. In addition, understanding the policies and political climate in other states can support students' thinking about venturing to out-of-state schools. The Higher Ed Immigration Portal has information for each [state](#).

Driver's Licenses and Access to Healthcare

For example, when establishing resources such as volunteer or shadowing opportunities in states that do not provide driver's licenses to specific groups, advisors should note whether transportation resources would benefit students, especially if the school is not in a city where public transportation is accessible. Likewise, if there are limited healthcare resources for undocumented communities in the state/county/city in which the student resides, advisors should consider partnering with the institution's student health clinic and local clinics to set up on-campus pop-up clinics. Adding language to event flyers, such as *"This event is open to everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and immigration status,"* will invite students of all backgrounds. Since many undocumented individuals do not have access to private health insurance, students may

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assume that the on-campus services provided to students, even the student health center, are not meant for them. Advisors should reassure students that the campus fees they pay make them eligible for on-campus resources.

Professional Licensure

Many opportunities, such as volunteering, internships, and professional licensure, require steps such as background checks, which can present barriers to undocumented students. Advisors can better assist their students with obtaining these experiences/opportunities if they understand these requirements and how they are used.

First, advisors should be aware of the Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), which

“is a tax processing number issued by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The IRS issues ITINs to individuals who are required to have a U.S. taxpayer identification number but who do not have, and are not eligible to obtain, a Social Security number (SSN) from the Social Security Administration (SSA)... IRS issues ITINs to help individuals comply with the U.S. tax laws, and to provide a means to efficiently process and account for tax returns and payments for those not eligible for Social Security numbers. They are issued regardless of immigration status, because both resident and nonresident aliens may have a U.S. filing or reporting requirement under the Internal Revenue Code” (Internal Revenue Service, 2023).

While ITINs are used for tax purposes, “ITINs may sometimes be accepted for other purposes, such as for opening an interest-bearing bank account, in employment dispute settlements, or for obtaining a mortgage” (National Immigration Law Center, 2022). Importantly for advisors advising pre-health students, the ITIN can also be used for background checks, becoming an entrepreneur, and applying for professional licenses in various states.

Second, many opportunities require background checks. Advisors should know that background checks can be completed without an SSN; name, date of birth, and address can be used to run a background check. Fingerprints may also be used for background checks. In addition, an ITIN may help, although certain companies that run background checks do not require a specific number and will have the applicant enter 000-00-0000 or 111-11-1111 (varies by company) if the individual requesting the background check does not have an SSN (Pre-Health Dreamers, 2021).

Every agency that runs background checks has its own application process. Individuals are encouraged to speak with the internship or volunteer sites, including clinical sites, and the company running the background check for further instructions and procedures when completing the necessary

forms (Pre-Health Dreamers, 2021). In addition, programs and advisors are also encouraged to ask at internships or volunteer locations that require an SSN from undocumented students if that requirement can be removed. If students are not getting paid as employees, there is no need to require an SSN or other documents that an employer requires. Sometimes, programs can also use an ITIN instead of an SSN. Advisors should discuss if the site can change onboarding processes to make the opportunity accessible for more students.

PHD frequently sends emails to nursing programs, clinical sites, internships, and volunteer opportunities that block students without an SSN. Often, educating people on how an SSN is not necessary for background checks and noting the importance of opening the doors for this population is sufficient for sites. PHD has often found that “technical” processes and uninformed coordinators may be the only reason a student is turned away. Remember that education, especially when done in a positive and welcoming manner, can work in a student's favor.

Finally, undocumented pre-health students might be interested in obtaining some type of professional licensure. It is important for advisors to know that undocumented individuals with an ITIN can apply for professional licensure in various states. States that extend professional licenses to undocumented individuals with an ITIN include California, Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, and New Jersey. Undocumented individuals who have DACA have additional options for professional licensure. Aside from the states that provide ITIN holders with professional licensure, Indiana, Tennessee, Texas (law), Washington (medical), and Arkansas (nursing and teaching) also extend professional licensure to DACA recipients. To learn more about professional licensure by state, visit the [Higher Ed Immigration Portal](#).

Programs are encouraged to support students if licensure is unavailable in the state where the school is located. Even more, some programs have allowed students to complete a program at their campus, such as nursing, and guided them to take the licensure exam in a different state where licensure is available to undocumented individuals. Advisors should discuss these options with their team and push for the flexibility to support the student's journey into licensure.

Final Words of Wisdom on Understanding State Policies

Suppose the program or school is in a city, county, or state that does not have policies supporting undocumented students. In that case, educators across the institution should seek training and coordinate efforts and resources to ensure the student has the most support and resources possible. Understanding the population educators serve and the obstacles students may face in their area is essential. Educators are encouraged to partner with local non-profits that may have resources students

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need, such as non-profits that specialize in immigrant health access, immigration laws, mental health wellness, and more. PHD has witnessed students find a strong support system that helps them through their journeys, regardless of the obstacles in their state.

Step 4. Work To Change Institutional Policies and Mindset

At many higher education institutions, staff and administrators do not prioritize support for undocumented students, often because they assume that undocumented students will not be able to use their degrees as professionals. Preconceived ideas that guide educators into believing that undocumented individuals cannot serve their community as professionals may stem from not understanding the lived experiences of immigrant families. They may also result from a lack of shared experiences—educators may not have had to navigate personal situations arising from immigration status and income-generating opportunities, and they may not have experience working with the community.

Advisors should be aware that such assumptions may also stem from working in institutions where advisors are trained primarily on traditional career pathways and very little on entrepreneurship with a degree. However, approximately 16.5 million individuals are self-employed in the country, making up about 10.4 percent of the total working population (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). More importantly for advisors working with pre-health students, entrepreneurship and self-employment skills can be extended to health providers, educators, and other professionals who can serve the community on many levels as entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurship takes extra effort, which may be a challenging idea and process for students to digest. But it is a pathway, and one to which students should be introduced early, especially before they enter their professional careers. Advisors should seek out nonprofits that provide courses to individuals seeking to start businesses. Many nonprofits receive grants to provide such resources and provide them for free. In addition, advisors should invite these organizations to visit Dream Centers and career centers to train counselors and offer workshops to students.

Step 5. Implement Policies with Fidelity

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) missions in higher education work towards creating accessible spaces for students of “different race, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, education, socio-economic background, life experience, geography, religion, ideology, and more” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2023). Undocumented students are solemnly included in these efforts. The Obama Administration implemented DACA over a decade ago; however, many educators and higher education stakeholders are new to this population's needs.

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Even so, PHD has experienced DEI directors who are open to discussing the needs of undocumented students and spearheading conversations around support. PHD encourages the inclusion of DEI directors in discussions as students and advisors seek help for this population. Training and research are encouraged for all staff, administrators, and stakeholders who plan to establish resources for undocumented students. Researching and self-training can mean speaking with other schools advanced in this journey. Learning from other schools' missteps and advances can alleviate any issues.

As of September 2021, over 30 bills nationwide have been written or passed restricting DEI practices in higher education (Bryant & Appleby, 2023). With recent affirmative action decisions in the United States, educators who know how to work with students from various backgrounds will be crucial to supporting diverse populations from historically underfunded and underrepresented backgrounds and communities (Garces, 2023).

If available, PHD encourages educators to work with their DEI directors to help seek, create, and establish undocumented students' resources to support their enrollment and graduation. If your state restricts DEI in schools, advisors should seek stakeholders in their institutions who can guide support for historically underrepresented and underfunded populations. Campuses can also collaborate with immigrant-friendly community organizations to increase support if administrators are not readily available.

Takeaways

When working in education, advisors and administrators have the potential to move the needle in the right direction. Everyone involved in higher education can be a changemaker for an individual or an entire group of students.

Now more than ever, advising is synonymous with advocacy, especially if advisors work with undocumented students or students from historically underfunded populations. In every encounter, educators can move the needle in the right direction. Going “above and beyond” when serving students not only supports the students' journey but can also create change for future students. Learning about community resources and policies that affect students and getting involved with on-campus organizations will provide professional growth.

Remember that learning how to serve undocumented students is an active and imperfect process that requires constant learning and education. Educators must be honest with themselves and the students they serve. Set goals, network, and build community. Lastly, connect with other educators doing similar work to learn from each other. Also, make a support system with other educators working with this population to ensure the sustainability of the work and the individuals leading it.

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